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SKIN WHITENING IN CONTEMPORARY TEWAHDO ICONOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis the influence of Caucasian religious imagery, particularly of Italian origin on the representation of race in Tewahdo iconography in Eritrea has been studied. Indigenous Christian iconographs which have been in use in the Tewahdo (Orthodox) church since the 8th century AD are commonly characterized with black skinned holy figures and traditional costume and environment. The study highlights the effects of Caucasian Catholic images that have influenced the culture of iconographic depiction, as iconographers use the imported images as models for their copied iconographs. The main focus is shed on the post colonial significance of the resulting whitening of iconographs in relation to their function in rendering the dehistoricization and depoliticization of the realities of colonial subjugation and discrimination. Further, the notion of colorism in the iconographs (skin colour distinctions within the black people) which has been reinforced during Italian colonization is discussed as symptomatic of pre-colonial hierarchies and claims of genealogical purity in association with Semitic descent. The thesis also discusses the use of racial body signifiers in the creation of dichotomous meanings of good and evil. Using a semiotic framework, it is argued that regardless of the intentions of the iconographers, the depicted representations yield a myth that legitimizes the existing power order of colonial hierarchy and subjugation.

Keywords: African iconography, representation, whitening, black iconography, hegemony, mimicry, Tewahdo.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Purpose of the Study:

Religious art in the Orthodox Christian faith, known as *Tewahdo* in Eritrea, holds key value in the liturgical procession and worship cultures. One of the vital attributes of the Church is the use of holy icons for reverence by the faithful. For more than a millennium, iconographic paintings have been used as mediums of prayer and texts of visual narration depicting biblical and evangelical scenes. These visual depictions have principally dictated the interrelations of seeing and knowing the narratives by conferring a visual form the devotees can directly connect to.

This style of depiction is referred to as *Tewahdo* art in this study conveniently, although it has often been labeled along with "Ethiopian Orthodox paintings", "Ethiopian iconographs", "Byzantium/Byzantine art" and "African art" among others. All these nominations do not fit to give a precise labeling, because the style of iconography belongs to both Eritrean and Ethiopian churches and is different from Byzantine or African art although it bears much influence from both styles.

This visual style associated with the Tewahdo church is the most common pictorial art found in Eritrea in the form of paintings, several of which can be seen on canvases and walls of churches, large and small, both in urban centers and villages. Although the exact date of the introduction of Christianity to the Axumite kingdom (empire) is not consensually identified, different accounts concur to the proclamation of Christianity as the official religion in the 4^{th} C by King Ezana after his conversion by a Syrian Greek; and latter Orthodox Christianity was further spread in the following centuries by exiles fleeing theological prosecution in the Byzantine. Since their introduction in the 6^{th} century A.D, iconographs have had key prominence as aesthetic and worship materials on the account of the Orthodox church's view that spiritual knowledge begins with things that can be seen with the eyes and touched with the hands (Simmons, 2009; Wilken, 2003).In the early days of the *Tewahdo* Church illuminated manuscripts, icons and crosses were made by monks for abbots,

nobles and emperors in monasteries with predominant imitation of Byzantine illustrations brought along with earliest Christian manuscripts. These illuminations are sometimes considered as witnessing an iconography from the beginnings of Christianity, now disappeared and only known through its relic in certain Oriental Churches, such as the Armenian and Ethiopian (Tiesse, 2013).

Relying initially on predominantly Byzantine models, iconography in the Tewahdo church decisively departed from these prototypes to develop a distinctive idiom favoring bold colors and two-dimensional abstract design (LaGamma, 2008). The styles of depiction of characters in these images have been gradually modified to resemble the Semitic-African looks of the *Habesha*[1] people of today's Eritrea and Ethiopia. In addition to its Byzantine origins, Tewahdo iconography has been enriched along the span of its evolution by incorporating visual elements from various cultures that the Axumite state was exposed to, including Egypt, Israel, Nubia, India, and Western Europe (Chojnacki, 1973). The development of Tewahdo iconography as a distinct visual culture entails generations of efforts in adoption and appropriation of imagery by negotiating the balance of foreign and local elements.

The modern day movement of the visual culture of the Tewahdo church has been heavily marked with the influence of Roman Catholic iconography. Although there had been previous stimulus from the European continent the most notable sway surfaced in the 16th century when Roman Jesuit missionaries brought into Ethiopia Italian iconographs that were soon valued as objects of higher aesthetical value by the locals (Pankhrust, 1973; Chojnacki, 1973). The second Caucasian iconographic spur came with the onset of Italian colonization of Eritrea at the down of the 20th century. Coinciding with the wider availability of means of mechanical reproduction

[1] A self-descriptive cultural definition derived from "Abyssinia," today applied to members of the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic group, as well as Tigrinya- and Amharic speaking Christians in Ethiopia. Habesha defines the culture that was produced by the fusion of Semitic and Cushitic elements in the Eritrean-Tigrayan highlands and that flowered as an original civilization during the Axumite period. (Connel and Killion 2010: 279).

and distribution in Italy, mass distributed imagery in the form of photographs and prints soon brought about a cultural hegemony in the Eritrean colony (Polezzi, 2012). Although the new Catholic Church established by the colonial regime did not succeed in large scale conversions in the new colony mainly due to resistance by the Tewahdo community, imported Roman Christian chromolithographs nonetheless were accepted by the Tewahdo community into the liturgical and private spheres. The mechanically duplicated iconographs induced a new look of the visual representation in Christianity, as the Biblical personages and settings that had been commonly depicted as Semitic-African and African were then replaced by Caucasian bodies and settings.

Tewahdo iconography has always relied on the practice of using existing models for replication essentially making it a copyist culture. New church paintings are till date replicated from older iconographs and mechanical reproductions leaving artists thin chances to present their own expressions and skills. It is in such a context that the Italian chromolithographs (prints) functioned as models of reference by Tewahdo iconographers who imitated many elements of representation from the mechanical copies of mostly Baroque origin that were widely found in abundance in the colony.

The modern history of Tewahdo iconography is marked with the resonance of Caucasian additions and manipulations on the inherent Semitic-African depiction style of the Tewahdo church. The inflow of Caucasian imagery that primarily commenced with the 16th century missions of the Jesuit order from Roman Catholic church and latter with the early of 20th century Italian colonial conquest of Eritrea eventually led to the incorporation of 'White' iconographs in the worship spheres of Tewahdo churches and private spaces. The popularity of Caucasian representation of holy personages has gained momentum to the extent that 'Caucasian' or 'white' iconographs have tended to be viewed as better representations of holy figures. With the consideration of holy figures depicted in the Caucasian body type as a natural and logical representation, non Caucasian depiction is often regarded as mere lack of artistic skills in depicting the true natural Caucasian physical form (EOC, 1995).

Far from being just an illustration, a depiction is the site for the construction and depiction of social difference; and such constructions can take visual form (Fyfe and Law, 1988). Analyzing the compositional make up of an image in terms of the identity of the prototypes enables comprehension of underlying ideologies and myths that subtly work in favor of the dominant power structures in a given society.

According to Anthea Callen (1998) social formations shape the construction of represented bodies in pictorial images and the reading of meanings:

> "…the represented body is an abstracted body: the product of ideas that are culturally and historically specific, and in which the social formation of the producer determines the appearance and meanings of the body; its meanings are then further modified in the act of consumption "(Callen, 1998).

This study addresses the use of racial body signifiers in dialectical representation of good and evil as a practical effect of the historical hegemony of Eurocentric media in the religious spheres of the colony Eritrea. It addresses the distinctions inferred in the use of racial body types in the signification of meaning where holy characters have been depicted as 'white' or Caucasian and evil- doers as 'black'.

The effect of the stream of imagery from Rome has been visible in the production of local iconographs that mimicked the Italian models in partial and identical replication. One of the significances of these mass distributed reproductions is that they have made holy icons closer than ever to the devotees. Apparently this surge in reach and appeal has at the same time intensified the mass indoctrination potential of the Italian originated iconographs.

This research focuses on the depiction of colonial-racial hierarchies by focusing in particular on the racial signifiers used in the replication and modification of Italian iconographs. The study follows a critical approach recommended by Dona Haraway (1991) of examining how institutions mobilize certain forms of visuality to see and to order the world. The semiotic examination studies particular signifiers used in the Caucasian inspired duplicates and hybrids that tend to naturalize racial

hierarchies through connoted meanings that elevate Caucasian supremacy. It further addresses how other iconographs contest the dominant scopic regime enforced by Roman imagery through the representation of social difference in non-hierarchical ways. These are iconographs that continued to incorporate Caucasian identity elements and those that kept their local identity.

The domination of Caucasian iconography as a favored representation of holy personages is addressed in this study as a phenomenon of cultural hegemony over Tewahdo iconography. The hegemonic ascendancy of the Caucasian iconographs came along with the social and economic status of privilege attained by the Italian class of settlers and colonial administrators. As delineated by Antonio Gramsci, hegemony exists when a spontaneous consent is given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group, and is historically caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production (Lears, 1985). In this case study, it is argued that the spontaneous consent by the masses was being stimulated through the moral justification delineated in the revered worship images.

1.2. Statement of the Problem:

This study builds upon a hypothesis about the ideological bearing of the dominant Caucasian superiority in the representation patterns in Tewahdo iconography. The cultural domination of Caucasian iconographs is hypothesized as an outcome of the historical hegemony of the Italian colonial establishment over the Eritrean colonized mass.

The main research questions that have been dealt with in this study fall under the hypothesis of promotion of racial hierarchy and supremacy of the Caucasian race over the Black race in the iconographs. The focus is put upon examining the signification system employed in particular reproductions made from Caucasian

models to create ground for closer analysis to elucidate underlying myths and connotations of racial supremacy and power hierarchy.

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. In what forms has the Caucasian iconography promoted (if it did at all) the moral and social superiority of the Italian race over the subjugated Eritrean society?
2. What sort of racial signifiers have been used to promote this colonial/racial supremacy? What kind of non racial signifiers had previously been used in earlier Tewahdo iconographs?

Today in the post Italian colonization era, 'Caucasian' iconographs have been incorporated by the clergy and faithful both in the premises of churches and private spheres. These 'Caucasian' or 'white' iconographs are commonly being viewed as preferred representations of holy figures. This research deals with the articulation of an ideological racial distinction that associates black skin with sin and evil on one hand, and on the other, Caucasian skin with holiness, cleanliness and goodness.

The depiction of 'black' holy figures is today often viewed as nothing more than lack of artistic craftsmanship in the realistic depiction (Mehari, 2014, oral interview) and not as a purposeful affirmation of identity or appropriation of religious signification. The image of the Caucasian Saint Mary is, for example, widely perceived as more beautiful than her depiction in the traditional "Black" Mary form. This is evident when one sees the dominance of the "Caucasian" iconographs over the "Black" iconographs. In a society that sets Saint Mary's looks as the divine perfection of female beauty, the makeover in representation from the Tewahdo 'black' Mary (*Mariam*) to a Caucasian Mary denotes the credence of the Caucasian form over the African.

1.3. Methodology:

Critical analysis of visual images is not natural or innocent considering that ways of seeing are historically, geographically, culturally and socially specific (Rose 2006) .The necessity for a subjective scrutiny in this case has been a key factor behind the choice of the qualitative approach. This research uses a combination of qualitative data collection and analysis tools. As a primary data collection method, visual anthropology was primarily selected for its suitability in the study of indigenous media as a production of culture. Key informants (Key knowledgeables) were interviewed prior to the sampling and data collection stages. These were three prominent artists in Eritrea (Ghidey Ghebremicael, Brhane Tsighe and Frezghi Fsseha) and Qeshi Mehari Mussie, head of crafts and heritages unit of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. They were selected based on their expertise to offer needed insights and information on the subject. The insights they provided regarding the locations of possible sites of observation were valuable in the selection of the four churches where the data has been collected.

Qeshi Mehari Mussie was recommended after a visit to the head quarter office of the Eritrean Orthodox Church by the Personnel office who provided his contact address. The key informant sampling also known as judgment sampling of the artists was made based on the recommendations of Yohannes Fitwi, an Eritrean state TV producer of cultural programs and Henok Tesfabruk, a newspaper journalist who has written many pieces on Eritrean culture. They had prior contact with all the artists and arranged the initial appointments. They chose the artists citing the reason that they were the most popular contemporary artists who get most commissions to paint churches in Eritrea. The open ended intensive interviews with the three artists were all recorded in audio, and later used in the analysis. These were followed by visits to their studious, to observe the actual process of production of iconographs. The visits that were conducted between the middle of June and first week of August 2014 were recorded in video and photographing for latter analysis. Later with the dynamics of the development of the discussion, some images and patterns that were not even noted during the data collection stage were found in the video and photograph

collection that was gathered. For example, the distinctions of colorism between Semitic and non Semitic Africans was noted at the latter stages of the data analysis. After the phenomenon was noted later, the gathered visual data confirmed the existence of such a pattern in the images. Similarly, the existence of blue colored monsters in Tewahdo iconography was only discovered after the review of the photographic and video recordings. Overall, 225 digital photographs and 205 digital video shots (scenes) were recorded between the 5th of July and the 15th of August 2014. Every single video recording was encoded as a separate file in the collected data, thus every file in the data is one scene that was shot without interruption. These were recorded as part of the participant observation in Ethnographic tradition. The researcher went to the sites with a palm size handy cam (Sony CX240E), a digital still camera (SAMSUNG GT-I8150), and a Sony Alpha high resolution semiprofessional still camera. The two small cameras helped the researcher to remain unobtrusive in the prayer rituals, by avoiding attention as much as possible, as such small cameras are also commonly used by worshipers who record different ceremonies in the churches. Thus the presence of the small cameras did not create any alerts during any of the ritual masses. The researcher attempted to his best to put himself in the position of the viewers or worshipers of the images when taking the pictures. The intrusiveness of the camera equipment was minimized by doing the video recordings on Sundays, as there are many videographers and worshipers with cameras who take pictures and videos of weddings and baptisms in the church. So the researcher was embedded in the routine Sunday church rituals. At the end of the mass and prayer, when there is relative freedom to take more pictures, the researcher generally used the semi-professional DSLR camera to take higher resolution photos. The only time, the research had to ask permission was in *Adi Raesi* village, as there were no ceremonies in the church on that Sunday. The bigger sized DSLR sony camera, which was not easy to conceal was used during the whole recording session in this case with the permission of the deacon who waited for the researcher to take many pictures and videos he needed.

A random sampling of sites would not have been beneficial in assessing the peculiar samples that were required to make the comparative analysis. Besides, as the number of churches that mainly contain indigenous Tewahdo iconography is very limited, a random sampling would have been more likely ended up in sites that hold similar ratio and kinds of representations.

The key informants indicated sites where samples of the iconographic types in the study (Tewahdo iconography, hybrid and Caucasian) would be found. Enda Mikiel church of Adi Raesi was selected for the large number of Tewahdo iconographs it houses. Enda Mariam church was chosen because it was built during the height of the Italian colonization. The influence of Italian artists and their artistic conventions which were popular in the colony can be seen in the church, according to Artist Ghidey Ghebremichael, an iconographer, whose late father also was a Tewahdo iconographer. Enda Abune Aregawi church was chosen as it contains a hybrid of both styles of iconography; and final site and the latest built site, Enda Giorgis was selected because it contains predominantly Caucasian iconographs.

The selection of the sites did not consider a temporal modality in the sense of including oldest churches and new ones. The selection was made based on the dominant styles depicted regardless of the time of production.

The key informant- guided choice of sites was beneficial in the Maximum Variation Sampling (Heterogeneous Sampling) that has been used in this study. This procedure that is usually used when working in qualitative analysis in smaller samples was selected to collect the widest range of possible iconographic themes and influences. Primary sites of observation and comparison represent the range from the least influence of Caucasian imagery to maximum domination of Caucasian imagery. Within every site, typical case sampling has been used to pick out particular iconographs that were selected as illustrative of the general trend within the site based on the particular characteristics they exhibit.

The interviews were also useful in the formulation of analysis of the findings as the artists were later asked after data collection in the sites about the procedures they follow during iconographic production. Follow-up visits were conducted in their studios and a participant observation was made to get a first hand impression. The studio visits were all recorded in still photographs and video for later data analysis.

The study entails a close analysis of Caucasian iconographic images (paintings and prints), locally produced duplicates and modified versions made in their reference. Such Caucasian–copied iconographs are comparatively analyzed against indigenous Tewahdo iconographs that have been least affected by the trend of whitening and loss of identity..

Photographing of paintings and illustrations on canvases and murals inside Tewahdo churches has been used as the main data collection tool for observation in this study.

As this research is keen in highlighting the ideological essence behind the resonance of shifts in the graphic representations in the Tewahdo iconography, it relies on a semiological reading of images in relation to the social and historical contexts in the Eritrea. Like many other semiological studies, this research largely concentrates on the images themselves as the most important sites of meaning. A close attention is given to the compositional modality of the images, in particular in the use of signifiers in relation to their significances in the making of meaning process.

The key data analysis method used is Semiotics. Semiotics in the sense that it is used here should be conceived as investigation into how meaning is created and how meaning is communicated. As outlined by Leuween (2005), besides systematic collecting and organizing of data Semiotics entails the investigation of how cultural resources are used in specific historical, cultural and institutional contexts. Tewahdo iconography has been studied in this manner in relation to how it has functioned in asserting identity and the replicating racialization of power. Besides, post colonial

analysis has been used in conjunction to make sense the construction of cultural discourse in the historical contexts that situate the iconographs and their settings. Semiology has been selected as it is a convenient critical analysis tool of studying ideological bearings of pictorial media. Semiology has been defined as a method of laying bare the prejudices beneath the smooth surface of the beautiful (Irversen, 1987). Semiology is not advocated as a science for its quantitative aspect, but rather the scientific claim is founded upon a definition of a science that contrasts ideology. Ideology on the other hand is knowledge that is constructed in such a way as to legitimate unequal social power relations; science, instead, is knowledge that reveals those inequalities (Rose, 2001).

Photography and video recordings have been made part of the research process in information gathering as it might be difficult to revisit the different sites later. Besides, as outlined by Sarah Pink (2009) visual recording is an efficient method in anthropological studies as it :

> "…can enable us to take ourselves back into the research situation by reviewing video to imagine ourselves back into that context … and make us realize things we did not realize in that brief moment of doing research".

Another significance of making visual recording in this research is the fact that the indigenous iconographs are vanishing that in the future it may not be possible to study them in their actual spatial and ritual context. The visual data collected may serve for future research and reference as well.

1.4. Scope and Limitations of the Study

Tewahdo iconography can be studied from different approaches and be dealt from the perspective of diverse themes including Art history, theological analysis, mass distribution and reception analysis among others. The scope of the current research is limited to the effects of Italian (Roman) Catholic imagery in particular on the representation systems commonly used in the indigenous Tewahdo iconographs.

The study exclusively studies signifiers used in iconographs in an effort to analyze how these signifiers may be related with underlying reflections of the historical hierarchies between the Italian (Caucasian) race and the colonized indigenous Tigrinya nationality that mostly adheres to the Tewahdo church.

The particular focus put on the encoding of signifiers does not extend to the perception and attitude of viewers of the images. The choice to stick to semiological study of images was based on the above mentioned scope of the research that explores the appropriation and adoption of particular signifiers of the dominant Caucasian iconography. As a recommendation for further research, an audience reception analysis on the same issue can bear significant insights on the attitudes of the faithful towards the whitening make over in Tewahdo iconography.

The study regards Caucasian depiction in the same category with Italian depiction, as it nonetheless was perceived as more or less the same in the Tewahdo spheres of worship. The influence of European iconographs in general has been associated with historical experiences of Italian colonial and post colonial realities. In Eritrea any Caucasian race is commonly referred to as Italian (*Tilyan*), indicating the parity of the Caucasian and Italian races to the population whose major and longest colonial experience was under the Italian state.

This study has made use of studies and other researches carried in Ethiopia regarding Tewahdo iconographs in setting the background for the theme of Tewahdo iconography. There are multiple reasons for this. As Eritrea was under Ethiopian rule for the most part of the second half of the 20th century, most research done in Ethiopia was inclusive of Eritrea as well. Researchers such as Stanislaw Chojnacki (1964, 1973) and Marilyn Heldmann (1994) who studied many sites in Eritrea have published their findings under the theme of Ethiopian religious imagery. This justifies using their work as a base in this study. Besides, the common beginnings of Tewahdo Christianity during the kingdom of Axum and latter developments that affected both countries including Roman Jesuit missions in the 16-17 centuries make it necessary to set the background in alliance with developments that took place in

Ethiopia. However the discussions and arguments put forward in this research are made in the post Italian colonial context in Eritrea, and thus should only be used as preliminary insights for similar themes in the Ethiopian Tewahdo studies.

1.5. Study Overview

The second chapter presents the historical and cultural background that familiarizes the reader with Tewahdo iconography and its significance as a constituent of national identity in Eritrea. An historical outline of the evolution of Tewahdo iconography is carried out in this section. This section also covers racial and ethnic hierarchies existent within Eritrean ethnicities, that are still relevant in attitudes regarding whiteness and blackness in Eritrea. Pre-colonial mind-set of valorization of whiteness that is reflected in the discourses of language and culture in the Tigrinya society is introduced in this section, as part of the fundamental elements that need to be considered when discussing racial representation in religious art in particular in Eritrea.

The third chapter covers the literature review. This section introduces fundamental theories in Semiotic studies that are relevant in the study about ideological aspect of images. The theoretical foundations that form the backbone of the analysis in this study are all discussed here. The ideological significance of cultural products is discussed here in relation to the encoding of signifiers in meaning creation. Key literatures in postcolonial studies that are particularly relevant to studies about blackness during and after colonialism are related to the dynamics of Tewahdo iconography. Finally, this chapter briefly introduces previous research carried about Tewahdo Iconography both in Eritrea and Ethiopia. As many of the studies had been carried before Eritrea gained its independence in 1993, they continue to refer to findings that also represent Eritrea, as Ethiopian. It is also necessary to note that most of the pre-colonial developments since the introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia in the 4th century equally affect the Eritrean Tewahdo as they do the Ethiopian Tewahdo. What some researchers refer to as Ethiopian

religious art, is referred here justifiably as Tewahdo art, as the label includes both Eritrean and Ethiopian Tewahdo pictorial art.

The fourth chapter presents the findings in the four sites visited in the field work. The findings in Enda Mikiel Church, Enda Mariam Church, Enda GiorgisChurch and Enda Abune Aregawi Church are comparatively discussed in relation to the styles of depiction of race and identity, and what the depiction infers in the assertion of identity and colonial subjugation.

The concluding chapter is reserved for summary of the findings and suggestions for further study. Here, the key findings of the research are outlined and discussed in relation to the historical realities that are vital in understanding the ideological implications of the trends in visual traditions in Tewahdo iconography. This section relates how this study fits with existing studies carried in visual culture and post colonialism, and indicates how it adds up to the existing body of knowledge in the field, as it introduces the field of iconography in Eritrea, a topic that has not been a subject of due focus despite its significance in understanding contemporary culture and identity in postcolonial Eritrea and Africa in general.

2. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Eritrea, an Historical Overview

Today Eritrea has a population of 6.38 million in nine ethnic groups and divided between Moslems and a majority of 57.7 percent of the population belonging to the Orthodox (Tewahdo) faith. (CIA, 2014; PEW, 2011) The sedentary Christian Orthodox highlanders of Eritrea and Ethiopia (Habesha) have always dominated the Abyssinian realm (Eritrea and Ethiopia) and thus been instrumental in designing the political attributes of the state and the dominant culture of the nation (Tronvoll, 2014). Their religion- the Orthodox (ተዋህዶ, Tewahdo) Church of highland Ethiopia and Eritrea has remained the dominant religion of this part of the Horn of Africa for nearly 1700 years (Casad, 2014).

Modern cultural history of the country stretches back to the Axumite Kingdom, which was one of the greatest civilizations in Africa in the first millennia established by the Sabeans who crossed from the Western shores of the Red sea, and suited primarily in the area of what is today Northern Ethiopia (Tigray) and the Eritrean highlands. Prosperity the kingdom that once extended from the Meroe in the Sudan to as far as the Arabian subcontinent was based on trade across the Red sea through the port of Adulis which served as outlet for commerce and interactions with Middle East and Europe.After the fall of the Axumite Empire in the 8th century, the history of Eritrea was highlighted with the rise and fall of local chiefdoms and contests. Many parts of the country including the northern, eastern and western areas fell under Ottoman, the Egyptian and Sudanese rules at different points in time. The territorial entity that is now Eritrea came into being with the advent of Italian colonization at the end of the 19th Century.

Despite the presence of Italian missionary and trade agents since the 15th and 16th centuries, their colonial presence was solidified when the Italian army took over the port city of Massawa in 1882, in haste of the rush for the scramble for Africa. The Italian advance did not encounter much resistance from the Eritrean chiefs who

were left with a land emaciated with famine and Ethiopian invasions (Yohannes, 2010). In their advance towards the south though, the Italians clashed with the Ethiopians; and soon after the death of Ethiopian emperor Yohannes, they quickly moved taking the town of Keren and the capital Asmara in 1889. They later brought the new king Menelik to sign an agreement of the borders demarcating the current border between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Italy's initial colonial administration went in line with the indigenous laws and traditions and using the system of indirect rule through traditional political elites, staying away from local economic and social systems. On the other hand, Italian Catholic missionaries strove to convert Eritrean communities who were mostly Orthodox Christian, Moslem and a minority of animists. The venture of the Catholic missionaries came as a continuation of unsuccessful Jesuit missions to the lands of Eritrea and Ethiopia in the 17th century. There was little success in the conversion missions this time also for many reasons including the fact that Orthodox Christianity had long history in the Tigrinya society and religion was intertwined with culture forming a key layer of identity. Resistance to Roman Catholic missionaries was inflamed along with the resistance from the local population that surfaced upon the confiscation of local farm lands and the subsequent settlement of poor laborers from Italy by the colonial government (Miran, 2007; Dirar, 2002).

The Italian Colonial project had three principal goals: to create a territory for settlement of Italian emigrants, to produce raw materials for export to the metropole, and to develop a colonial conscript army to fight Italy's foreign wars (Sharkey, 2013). The colonization was marked by racial segregation and discriminatory laws. For the native Eritreans, education was restricted only up to grade four and many services were made inaccessible to the locals by the apartheid racial laws and an emphasis on the inferiority of Africans. Although basic education was initially given to few Eritreans by Italian and Swedish missionaries, the Italian missionary schools enjoyed the monopoly after the expulsion of Swedish missions from the colony with the rise of Fascists in Rome in 1922 (Miran, 2002). This system segregated local populations from European populations establishing the ethno-racial ideology of

superiority of Europeans and Middle Eastern people over the local African populations (Woldemikael 2005).

Italian Colonization in Eritrea came to a halt during the conclusion of Second World war British forces advancing from the west of the Eritrea gradually defeated the Italians and took over the country in 1941. The British who stayed in Eritrea only until 1944 transplanted much of the infrastructure built by the Italians and moved it to India and other destinations before they began their slow withdrawal from the country. The country was left at a state of uncertainty where the public was dissected between political parties that favored independence of the country; those demanding unity with Ethiopia (backed by the Orthodox church which had strong ties with the Ethiopian king who favored the church) ; and the remaining pro-Italian proponents who advocated for Italian trusteeship over Eritrea in preparation for full national independence (Connel and Killion, 2010; Tesfagiorghis 2010; Iyob, 1997).

In 1952, Eritrea was handed by the British administration to Ethiopia as a federate according to decision by the UN (Negash, 1997). The decision had a lot to with the sympathy that the emperor was an enemy of Fascist Italy and a friend of the Allied forces. In 1962 Ethiopian King Hailesslassie annexed Eritrea following growing Ethiopian claim for Eritrea after the defeat of the Italians in the World War II (Sorenson, 1991).

Discontented Eritreans, who had been engaged in political struggle against unity with Ethiopia, reverted to an armed struggle for independence in 1961. The war against King Hailesslassie continued until his ousting from power by a communist Ethiopian junta – "Derg" in 1974, and intensified as the new Ethiopian military regime that was supported by the Soviet union was finally defeated in 1991 by the Eritrean People's Liberation (EPLF) Front and the Ethiopian Tigrean People's liberation front (TPLF). Eritrea was announced a sovereign state after a referendum legitimized by the United Nations in 1993.

Eritrea enjoyed only a handful years of peace and prosperity. In 1998, the country went to war with Ethiopia over a border dispute that remains unsolved although a ceasefire has been in place since 2000. The war has had severe impact on the country's economy and socio-political stability.

2.2. Tewahdo resistance against European Catholicism

2.2.1. Tewahdo as an ethno-national identity

Religion has always stood in Eritrea as a key defining element of social and individual identity. It has functioned in carving familial and social interactions and order, playing vital roles in the ways of thoughts, identities, and even relations among individuals and groups (Tesfagiorghis, 2010). As a key factor in the definition of identities in the pre-colonial as well as in the colonial context , religion became a core element of local identity, acting as basic instrument of social cohesion and sources of legitimacy for political authority (Dirar 2007). Religious identities predominate over other forms of ethno-racial identifications because religion functions as a socially constructed identity that mediates between kinship based ethno-racial identities and national identity (Woldemicael 2005: 343). Eritrean Orthodox faith is the most widely followed faith in Eritrea and generally has been intertwined with political and economic dynamics of the region in different aspects.

This traditional form of Christianity continues to exercise great influence over its 1.5 million adherents in Eritrea even after a 30-year nationalist struggle for independence (1961-1991) from their colonial neighbor: the explicitly Christian empire of Ethiopia.

The Orthodox (ተዋህዶ, *Tewahdo*) Church of highland Ethiopia and Eritrea has remained the dominant religion of this part of the Horn of Africa for nearly 1700 years (Casad). In the Eritrean highlands, where the majority of the population resides, villages are identified by their patron saints where all saints are honored on specific dates of the month which are spared as holidays, and once a year a

pilgrimage of the patron saint of the village is observed . The Tigrinya still use the old ግእዝ *Geez* calendar associated with the Tewahdo church, which marks the days and seasons for working, resting, fasting and weddings. The Tewahdo Church stands as an ethno-religious institution playing a key role in the social life of the villagers, where every family is assigned to one confessor priest who assumes the position of guidance and counsellorship to the family. Whole social formations and dynamics have been traditionally intertwined with the Orthodox church imprinting the cultural identity of these communities. Through long and complex processes of becoming locally rooted, *Tewahdo* Orthodox Christianity has stood as an ideological constituent of social order and power hierarchy.

The church, which forms one of the most important cornerstones in the culture of the Tigrinya nation, is possibly the oldest institution in the nation. Christianity was introduced to the region during the reign of Axumite king Ezana in the 329 AD th Century A.D. by Frementius, a Syrian monk , locally known as Aba Selama ,who first converted the king and his courts. After he was ordained as the first bishop by the patriarch of Alexandria, Orthodox Christianity was officially announced as the state religion. The conversion was followed by the translation of the Bible from Greek to *Geez* by the sixth century and followed by the arrival of other Christians from Eastern Roman Empire, mainly from Syria (Pankhrust 1973).

The term "*Tewahdo*" in *Geez* means unified, referring to the "Monopyshite" view on Christ, as opposed to the decree by the Chalcedonian council in 451 that declared two separate natures of Person and Nature (Meyendorff, 1969). The Eritrean Tewahdo Church along with the Ethiopian Tewahdo belong to the Oriental Orthodox group of Churches which also include Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church of India. The Oriental Orthodox Churches, also called non Chalcedonian churches, have been separated from the Catholic and Byzantium Orthodox churches since the fifth century.

It was due to the refusal to accept the Chalcedonian decree that nine monks who fled prosecutions by the Byzantine emperor after the Council of Chalcedon found refuge in the Axumite kingdom. The nine saints (Abba Za-Mika'el (or Abba Aregawi), Abba Pantelewon, Abba Gerima (or Yeshaq), Abba Aftse, Abba Guba, Abba Alef, Abba Yem'ata, Abba Libanos, and Abba Sehma) who established numerous monasteries in Tigray region in Ethiopia as well as in Eritrea came from Syria, Cappadocia (now in Turkey) , Cilicia and other Byzantine regions (McGuckin, 2011). Their efforts added impulse to the Monophysite Coptic Cause that was being advocated by missionary programs from Alexandria to have the Tewahdo church aligned with the non Chalcedonian cause.

The saints who greatly contributed to the strengthening of Monopyshite (*Tewahdo*)Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia are traditionally credited with the translation of the scriptures into the local *Geez* language and the illumination of holy books (Pankhurst 1973).

After the fall of the Axumite Kingdom around the 10th century A.D., despite political and religious unrest, Orthodox Christianity continued to be the main religion for the Tigrinya highlanders in Tigray and Eritrean highlands. Meanwhile, the power of the Axumite kingdom shifted south to the Zagwe dynasty , which was latter overthrown in the thirteenth century by Emperor Yekuno Amlak from a southern province of Showa who claimed descent from King Solomon and Queen of Sheba (Pankhurst 1973). For the most part of its Medieval history, the region was excluded from the rest of the world until the 14th century, when King Dawit sent an ambassador to Venice asking for a painter to train local icon makers in the art of copying religious texts and painted icons (Bascom, 2013).

The Solomonic descent is key to underline as it still holds the core of the legitimacy of *Tewahdo* church. It is believed in the Tewahdo church of Ethiopia and Eritrea, based on the 13th century manuscript *Kebra Negest* (Glory of Kings) that Queen *Sheba's* had visited King Solomon in Jerusalem and returned carrying a child. The claim of Solomonic decent is based on this legend that narrates the bringing of

the Arc of covenant from Jerusalem later by King *Menelik*, son of King Solomon and Sheba. The arc of Ten commandments, which is one of the foundations of the Judeo-Christian tradition and is assumed lost from Jerusalem, is believed by Tewahdo Christians to be inside a church in the town of Axum, although it is kept out of reach and vision of visitors. Tewahdo Christians believe that the lost arc is kept in the church in Axum, and replicas of the arc are housed in the altar (*Tabot)* out of reach and vision of the faithful in every Tewahdo church in the two countries. The arc has for more than a millennia formed the cornerstone of the legitimacy of Ethiopian kingdoms and the Tewahdo faith itself. It was in this context of claim to Solomonic descent that the Ethiopian kingdom took advantage of the power of visual culture to overcome existing regional rivalries and reaffirm the divine authority of the negus (king), the Ethiopian emperor especially in the relative era of political tranquility of the 15th century (Ginisci 2014).

2.2.2. Jesuit challenges in converting the Tewahdo

Tewahdo Orthodox religion has had longstanding history in the Eritrean highlands where it has manifested itself as a phenomenon of culture and social order. This deep rootedness of the faith in the society materialized as a source of resistance against attempts by European Catholic and Protestant missionaries who came both independently before the establishment of the Italian colonial enterprise and afterwards.

Catholic missions have always encountered hostile encounters in the Abyssinian region both during and after the Axumite kingdom. The earliest missions of significance were those of Portugese Jesuits who arrived in the region along with other expeditions upon invitation for support from the Ethiopian monarch. Eminent invasions and attacks from the Ottomans and Sultanate of *Adal* had driven the Ethiopians to look towards the Christian powers of Europe who brought along with them diplomatic and missionary dispatches. In 1528, Muslim armies led by Ahmed Gran had conquered vast lands in Ethiopia. Gran's army had looted churches and monasteries and destroyed a large number of manuscripts and iconographs.

Portuguese assistance in the form of soldiers and firearms was decisive to the empire's triumph in 1543(Cohen, 2009). The Jesuits who came along with the Portuguese brought along Western European skills and ideas in art and painting (Chojnacki ,1983). Although they were not able to carry out massive conversions, a few Portuguese missionaries stayed long after the defeat of Gran's forces.

A second missionary dispatch of the Jesuit missionaries that started in 1603 succeeded in converting Emperor Susenyos who eventually announced Catholicism as the official religion of the empire taking uncompromising measures enforcing conversion of the population (Mekonnen,2013; Chojnacki, 1983). The presence of the Portuguese Jesuits was marked with unpopular forced conversions into Catholic faith that culminated in resistance from the *Tewahdo* dominated population.

> " all Christian Ethiopians had to be re-baptised and all churches had to be re-consecrated. The sacred Tabots and *Geez* liturgy were to be discarded. It was too much, and the revolt became a civil war" (Savage, 2010).

The forced conversions in Ethiopia could not sustain because of the wide resistance and the emperor had to loosen the grip eventually. After the death of Emperor Susenyos and the accession of his son Fasilides in 1633, the Jesuits were expelled and the native Tewahdo religion was restored to official status (Mekonnen,2013).

Some of the Jesuits who fled north were given refuge by the Eritrean ruler (*Bahre Negasi)* in the hope of using them to preserve his autonomy against Ethiopians after they were expelled by the Ethiopian emperor's son. However, he soon handed them over to Turks at the port of Massawa who deported them under extreme hardship. Later attempts by Jesuits to return to the Eritrean coast were met with executions on the orders of Ethiopian rulers (Connel and Killion, 2010).

The Eritrean Tigrinya highland agriculturalist society had for long held Tewahdo Christianity as the ideology of national identity. That was the primary

reason from the time of the initial attempts at conversion by Jesuit fathers in the sixteenth century, missionary activities in the region faced strong and continuous opposition from the local Orthodox Church (Dirar, 2007).

2.2.3. Catholic conversion as a means of securing protection

In the mid 19th century Italian Catholic missionaries were able to penetrate into some areas in Eritrea and establish the Catholic Church, notably by Italian Lazarist, Guisteino De Jacobis, who engineered an indigenous ministry as a way of ensuring Catholic permanence in Eritrea (Yohannes, 2010).

European missionary expeditions tended to be successful in the remote and non-Christian areas rather those belonging to the local Orthodox Christianity. Early attempts by Roman Catholic missionaries to convert the local Orthodox Christians were often met with fierce prosecution in alliance with Ethiopian rulers forcing the missionaries to settle in the eastern part of Eritrea , mainly coastal Massawa area away from the Orthodox dominated highlands (Casad 2010; Connel and Killion 2010).

A similar turn of events namely the need for military and political support opened access for Jesuit missionary dispatches in the 19th century. The principal reason for allowing the Italian Catholic missionaries to establish churches this time was the hope of securing protection and patronage. At the time, many communities faced with a situation of prolonged instability and violence, which was threatening their very existence, resorted to conversion as a strategy for survival (Dirar, 2007). Eritrean highland chiefs including those who did not convert to Catholicism sought Italian assistance as this was deemed to be the best strategy to obtain military protection especially from Egyptian and Ethiopian hegemony (Okbazghi, 1991).

The access and favor gained by Catholic missionaries from local chiefs laid a suitable ground for the advent of Italian colonization in Eritrea, which didn't encounter much resistance in its advance. For example, Bahta Hagos, a prominent

chief who latter led resistance against Italians, had converted to Catholicism seeking support of the Europeans from Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes. When the Italian army arrived in port of Massawa, he joined the Italian army in their advance towards the Eritrean plateau and gave regular advises to the colonial army officers on decisions regarding local affairs (Tesfagiorghis, 2010; Dirar, 2007).

The announcement of Eritrea as the new Italian colony in 1890 brought about the consolidation of the current territorial demarcation engulfing diverse nationalities including the dominantly Muslim ethnic groups of the coastal and Western lowlands. On the onset of Italian colonization, the people of today's Eritrea were so emaciated with continuous raids, conflicts and great famine that they did not have the social, economic and political infrastructures for resistance as the communities' very existence was in grave danger. Besides, Italian presence in the territory resulted in relative peace for most Eritrean ethno-linguistic groups who suffered from external and internal strife during the pre-Italian period. (Tesfaghiorgi, 2010; Yohannes, 2010).

The attempt to bring the native Christian population within the fold of the Roman Catholic Church did not bring about the complete expulsion of the missionaries (as had been the case with the Portuguese Jesuits in two centuries earlier) but rather gave rise to the hybrid Eritrean Catholic Church (Cassad, 2010).

By 1907 Catholicism was announced an official religion of the Eritrean colony, alongside Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Apart from the communities which had earlier converted to Catholicism by Jesuits for protection and support, the Catholic community in Asmara and other Urban centers was entirely composed of *'askari* (conscripts) and laborers dependent upon the government (Lorenzi, 2013).

The new Catholic Church adopted much of the liturgical elements of the old traditions of the Orthodox Church incorporating it with elements of European Catholic traditions. Dirar (2013) with reference to Massaia (1978) states the presence of populations of Semitic origin in the region made the Catholic hierarchies believe

that “these Semitic people, assumed to be superior to the rest of Africa, could facilitate the ‘civilizing’ mission of Christianity in black Africa”. Catholic missionaries were viewed as another ‘arm’ which would participate in the establishment of an Italian colonial order in Eritrea (Miran, 2002). The role of Catholic missionaries in acquiring peaceful consent of the colonized population and establishing the colonial hierarchy was significant. Missionaries assumed the role of providing basic education that was given in the colony and played an important ideological role of implementing the desired Italianization of the colony. The missionaries' particular Italian brand of 'civilizing education' suited the state's needs in controlling its subjects through indoctrination and subordination (Miran 2002). Having controlled the provision of education, they were able to instill ideological superiority of Italy and Italians among indigenous societies among the Eritreans who attended these schools.

Overall, Christian missionary activities in Eritrea did not achieve much success compared to successful outcomes in expeditions in other European colonies. Opposition and reluctance towards conversion to Catholicism was enforced by the Tewahdo Church in particular. Orthodox monasteries with links to Ethiopia led the resistance against conversions by Catholic missions (Negash, 1987). Uoldeleul Dirar describes this trend considering the span of time of missionary activities in Eritrea:

> “ in spite of missionary expectations, rather than constituting a gateway to further missionary expansion in the region, Eritrea instead represented a closed gateway and an obstacle to missionary penetration in Africa. This is also borne out by statistical data which show very low rates of conversion to both Catholicism and Protestantism. This trend is even more impressive if one takes into account the temporal span of missionary activity” (Dirar, 2003).

Another reason for the failure of pre-colonial Jesuit missions aimed at converting the Tewahdo followers to Roman Catholicism was the fact that Christianity had been in practice in the region for more than a millennia when the Italian colonial enterprise arrived in Eritrea. The presumption by the colonizer that all of the colonized are “heathen as they do not belong to an established religion like

Christianity and that their religion was mere superstition" did not have relevance in the Eritrean context (Marandi and Shadpour, 2011). Thus a different sort of civilizing mission was in play, setting the priority of establishing the superiority and cleanliness of the White Italian over the black colonized society.

2.3. Ideology at work: Black and White Masks

2.3.1 Physical Looks and Ethnic Hierarchies in the Tigrinya

The emergence of the Orthodox Church in the region is associated with story of the mixing of Southern Arab and native African peoples (McGuckin, 2011). Race and ethnicity have always assumed crucial roles in the socio-political relations and interactions in Eritrea, particularly in the Tgrinya. In most Eritrean cultures individual and communal identities have been conceived primarily on factors of racial origin and religion. Ethnic groups like *Tigrinya* are composed of different genial lineages that define individual and familial recognition and stature. All heritages in the area are ancient, going back before the time of Christ. Different factors that have occurred over the centuries affect the subtle differences in the sense of identity of small family and clan groupings (Jenkins, 2012).

Such identity construction based on ethnic, racial and religious lineages is characterized in Eritrea with a puritan attitude of self and communal difference forbidding mixing and intermarriage with other racial, ethnic and religious groups. The Tigrinya who bear diverse physical looks due to their mixed origins have always set distinctions and hierarchies amongst themselves with contesting claims of racial purity and superiority.

The great majority of Tigrinya people who form 46.7 percent of the Eritrean population are Christians. Most of them belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, with a few Catholics, Protestants and a minority of Muslims, the *Jeberti* (Suleiman, 2013). The Tigrinya inhabits the highland (*Kebesa*) regions of *Hamasien*, *Seraye* and *Akele-Guzai*. Tigrinya families who descend from intermarriages with non Semitic

"African" people- have often long been considered a lower caste as due to their racial "impurity". The "African" bodily features they bear (e.g. darker skin tone, kinky hair, bigger lips… etc) are often associated with "impurity" in the ethnic group that claims its origins from Semitic origins in Southern Arabia. Such view of superiority further extends to other non Semitic Africans in the country and was exacerbated during the European colonial experiences in the 20th century.

> "For long, these Eritreans associated themselves with Middle Eastern and European Christian peoples and cultures rather than their African neighbors, whom they regard as to some extent inferior. The ethno-racial ideology of superiority of Europeans and Middle Eastern peoples over African populations was further established and internalized among the people of Eritrea especially in Italian Fascist era of apartheid system" (Woldemikael 2005).

Yet, intriguing enough, the Tigrinya society does not approve of intermarriage with Middle Easterners or Europeans. Children born out of such relations find it hard to be assimilated and accepted in the society. Most of the children born from Italian fathers and Tigrinya mothers have not been welcomed into the familial and social networks. Even today, at the age where a significant portion of the population resides abroad, intermarriage with non Eritrean spouses, regardless black or white, is usually frowned up on in the society.

2.3.2. Blackness in Christianity :Depictions and Beliefs

> "If we are to look at how colonization created the identities of both the colonized and the colonizer, we must recognize that historical situations are created by people, but people are in turn created by these situations. The way a person sees the world, both geographically and culturally, is dictated by their abstract understanding of the world. Although culture does exist as a tangible entity, it is the abstract ideologies of comparison between cultures that create cultural identities situated in social, economic, and political hierarchies" (Said, 2000).

The appropriation of Byzantium and latter Roman imagery in terms of cultural adoption and modifications has ideological significance in the affirmation of self and

national identity as the painters consistently produced iconographs with bodies and settings of the indigenous culture. The localized visual representation of the Bible in the Tewahdo churches and monasteries has had its value in making Christianity part of the tradition and culture of the society.

A rhetorical concern in this scenario is whether these "Black" iconographs were cultural and religious appropriations of "White" iconographs where Biblical figures were depicted as "Black" persons; or if there was a genuine belief of the 'Blackness' of the religious figures.

The rationale for depicting holy Christian figures as 'Black' or Habesha can be construed as a purposeful appropriation of religious signifiers in the construction of the Tewahdo churches visual identity. This could have been a conscious affirmation of the African church's rightful significance in Christianity. Painting Christian figures as 'Black' was an assertion that the 'Black' Habesha people are not the 'other' in Christianity. Colin Kidd stresses in his book "*The Forging of Races*" that there are multiple possibilities to the skin color of Christian figures from Adam and Eve to Jesus himself and it is not simply 'logical' to attribute a particular race or skin color to Biblical figures. His argument validates the depiction of "black" Christian figures in the Tewahdo church.

2.3.3. Pre-colonial Catholic Imagery from Rome

Despite the failure of the Jesuit mission in converting the Tewahdo population in Eritrea and Ethiopia the 17th century, their presence had left its imprint in the visual culture of the Tewahdo Church. Imagery brought by Jesuits from Rome in the form of engravings and books had visible impact in the local iconography and European artists employed by Ethiopian emperors for their services in the royal palace, fortress, and newly constructed churches also influenced local artists in many ways (Klemm, 2006; Ross, 2002). This was in particular observed in the depiction of St. Mary and child in the following 17th and 18th centuries, which was completely transformed from earlier styles of Marian representation in the Tewahdo culture

(Chojnacki,1983). The success imparted in visual imagery does not come as a surprise as this was a carefully planned strategy by the Jesuit order in their efforts to spread Catholicism across the world and assert the authority of Rome using imagery.

> "…the Jesuits made widespread use [of] sacred imagery as part of their missionary strategy, copying and disseminating certain favored iconographic types around the world, particularly the icon housed in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, dated c. sixth century AD but believed to have been painted by Saint Luke himself" (Boavida, 2015).

One reason the Jesuits were able to incorporate the images like Marian icons and cross was due to the reason that these images were particularly suited to visual representation in the Tewahdo church. Additionally, the ruling elite's fondness and regard for imported Marian images painted in the Byzantine style as more holy and effacious devotional images also played a significant factor(Heldmann, 2005). Heldmann (2005) further discusses the growing belief in the late 16th century in Ethiopia of Marian icons that possessed inherent sacred power citing multiple iconographs that she locates as Italo-Cretan, and marks that they are believed in the Ethiopian Tewahdo Church to have been painted by the evangelist St. Luke.

Copies of the particular image of Santa Maria Maggiore were widely incorporated into the liturgical realm of the Tewahdo church after the main copy was brought in the 1600's continue to be mass produced by painters. All the depictions are meant to imitate the original image that is considered divine both in the Roman Catholic church and the Tewahdo church. *Keshi* (priest) Mehari of the Orthodox Church Secretariat office states that all Marian depictions being made can never be as beautiful as the original painting by St. Luke which has performed divine miracles (2014, oral interview).

Yet, despite the domination of Caucasian imagery and the absorption of the style by local artists, there has always been a tendency to incorporate aspects of the local life and culture as early as 16th century (Chojnacki, 1973). Chojnacki provides examples of 16th century images with such features :

> "Mary at the Crucifixion is transformed from an artificially posed figure into a lamenting Ethiopian woman at a funeral. Christ is dressed in contemporary Ethiopian clothes, and enters Jerusalem under the umbrella of sovereign majesty. The group portrayed in the Flight into Egypt is a little Ethiopian family carrying provisions in local ware" (Chojnaki,1973).

The prominence of Caucasian iconographs in Eritrea grew in the second millennia with the conception of Italian colonial enterprise. The inherent African identity of the icons in the Tewahdo churches was challenged by the prints with these new images as aesthetic influences of the new prints overshadowed the ideological assertiveness of identity of the 'Black' iconographs.

Today, long after the end of Italian colonization, 'Caucasian' iconographs have been incorporated by the clergy and faithful both in the premises of churches and private spheres. In fact, these 'Caucasian' or 'white' iconographs have even been viewed as better representations of holy figures. The depiction of 'black' holy figures is today often viewed as nothing more than lack of artistic craftsmanship in the realistic depiction and not as a purposeful affirmation of identity or appropriation of religious signification. The image of the Caucasian Saint Mary is, for example, widely assumed in Eritrea as more beautiful than her depiction in the traditional "Black" Mary. This is evident when one sees the dominance of the "Caucasian" iconographs over the "Black" iconographs. In a society that refers to Saint Mary's facial composition as the divine perfection of female beauty, the preference of Caucasian Mary indicates the general consent given to credence of the superiority of the Caucasian and European beauty over the African; and on the other hand, a resounding of the conformity of the society to White superiority.

2.3.4. Local Perceptions about Racialized iconographs

"For the Black man, there is only one destiny and it is white."

Frantz Fannon, (1952)

In the Tigrinya culture, the color white signifies spirituality, holiness and joy. Men and women wear white in churches, religious festivals, holidays, weddings and other events. The color black on the contrary, signifies sadness and despair. Traditionally, black cloths are almost never worn by men and women.

Many verses in the Tigrinya language carry meanings that relate the color white with purity. The noun ጻዕዳ "xaeda" (*Geez* white) signifies innocence; referring to a person as ጻዕዳ "xaeda" (white) indicates the person is good hearted; or wishing a traveler ጻዕዳ ይጽናሕካ "xaeda yixnahka" (roughly translated as "may there be whiteness in your destination") refers to a wish of fortune and peaceful destination.

In Tigrinya language, black and darkness are signified by the same word. Darkness ጸልማት (xelmat) is the noun form and black ጸሊም (xelim) is the adjective. The associations of meaning of the word black ጸሊም (xelim) with the unseen and the fright of night clarify the meanings attached to the color black with the notion of darkness. Black is does not signify a color itself but the absence of light and visibility.

The current iconographic tradition in both Eritrea and Ethiopia is characterized with the representation of the devil as a black person, and holy figures in general as Caucasian. It is significant to note that a Black society associates blackness with darkness and evil; and how it came to embrace an iconographic signification system that represents evil and sinners as black persons and representing the good and holy as white persons.

Although existing associations of purity with whiteness and evil with darkness contribute for such representations, a comparison with early iconographs wouldn't bear such distinctions of skin color significations. In the old iconographs, especially in narrative paintings, other techniques have been used for long to identify the holy from the evil. One such technique is painting evil-doers sideways (profile) and painting the good and the holy with a frontal view of their faces and generally; evil doers and the holy would be painted in the same skin color.

The ideological significance of such racial color codification is that the religious paintings serve as mediums carrying subtle meanings highlighting the curse and sinfulness of the black skin on one hand and the goodness and moral superiority of the white skin on the other hand. This must have had its contributions in accepting the attitude of the Colonial Italian project of "Italianization." The crucial point to be admitted however is that most of these paintings have only been inspired and not directly produced by the Italians but by the colonized and post colonial Eritreans.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Arbitrariness of Signs

The study of cultural signification of meaning is mainly approached by the discipline of *Semiotics,* which is the study of signs and codes- signs that are used in producing, conveying, and interpreting messages and the codes that govern their use. This approach in communication studies views messages as made of signs and conveyed through sign systems called codes (Moriarty, 2005).

It was the widely attributed figure of European Semiology, Swiss theorist Ferdinand de Saussure who delineated the relationship between the sign and the object it stands for. Saussure maintained the view that language is not merely determined by reality, and further, that language, in the form of words, images or sounds constructs reality. This view holds that languages are not bound by pre-existing structures, and that rather, they are arbitrary codes of signification that classify and represent reality. Departing from the views of Saussure regarding the arbitrariness of the sign, a given system of signs floats within a certain context, culture, or ideology and would be different in another. Saussure explains non arbitrariness of words and signs by stating that they "had the job of representing concepts fixed in advance, one would be able to find exact equivalents for them as between one language and another. But this is not the case" (Saussure, 2013).

Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of signs can elaborate the discussion about the iconographs of the *Tewahdo* Church. Peirce concluded in *The Collected Papers* that reality (and thoughts) can only be known through representation via signs. He founded the semiotic analysis of a sign as interaction between the *representament*, the *interpretant* and the *object*, and made distinction between the object and the sense made of the object (*interpretant*). For Peirce (1974) a sign is

> ". . . is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an

> equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object"* (Chandler 2003)

The *sign* in Pierce's model is equivalent to Saussure's signifier and the *object* is similar to Saussure's concept. Using Peirce's approach, we can separate the objects being represented in the iconograph (the Holy figures) and deal with the sense being created in the minds of the users (the interpretant).

Peirce discusses that in iconic signs, the signifier represents the signified by having a likeness to it (Rose,2001). He uses another triad—iconic, indexical, and symbolic—to explain the nature of the relationships he identified for signs (Chandler, 2003). In this model images are understood to (a) resemble other objects (icon), (b) be causally and logically connected to other objects (index), and (c) be conventionally associated with other objects (symbol). The interpretant, or the meanings generated, as is shown, are therefore created through the interrelatedness of these sign functions (Dunleavy, 2005). Pierce (1894) puts this as:

> " Firstly, there are likenesses, or icons; which serve to convey ideas of the things they represent simply by imitating them. Secondly, there are indications, or indices; which show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them… Thirdly, there are symbols, or general signs, which have become associated with their meanings by usage. Such are most words, and phrases, and speeches, and books, and libraries" (Chandler, 2003).

Both Saussure's dyadic model and Peirce's triadic model stress on the immaterial nature of the sign. The *interpretant* in Peirce's model, like the *signified* in Saussure's model, represents the concept rather than the main object itself. Peirce maintains the view that words, sounds, images…etc do not have intrinsic meanings and that they only become signs when we associate them with meaning.

Semiologist Roland Barthes (1968) extended the concepts of signified and signifier to include the concepts of connotation and denotation. In Barthes' work, the

scope of the making of meaning is categorized into first and second levels of meaning. Denotation is the starting point; meaning making then shifts to the second level where connotation takes over and delivers a richer experience of the meaning by engaging Peirce's interpretants (Moriarty, 2005). He reiterates that connotation reflects cultural meanings, mythologies, and ideologies; pointing that a connotative meaning is derived from past experiences or repeated associations between a sign and its object.

3.2 Ideological labor and constitution of human subjects

Languages as cultural signifiers of meaning are contextually constructed amidst influences and attitudes in a given social power structure. As such, visual signs are inscribed with meaning systems carrying subtle attitudes and interests of their makers and/or the producers in control. Visual art, as a form of language, contains “underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work” (Panofsky, 1939).

Discourses render states of inequality and hierarchies that benefit certain groups whilst disfranchising others tend to appear as the 'normal' or 'natural' orders, legitimizing racial, sexual and other sorts of inequalities. What is laid thereby as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ forms the core of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of 'Hegemony'. When social structures and relationships are labeled as natural, they take on a kind of permanency and legitimacy that elevates them to the realm of being uncontested even by the exploited. Gramsci held the view that far from ideological indoctrination of subordinated groups as assumed in Classical Marxism, these subordinated groups accept the ideas values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically or mentally induced to do so, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated. He rather states that the dominant group’s supremacy and the subordinated group’s consent is based on economic domination on one hand and intellectual and moral leadership on the other (Strinati, 1995).

Gramsci noted the active role of people in struggling against hegemony, which he articulated as a dynamic process leading people to actively question and resist dominant ideological assumptions. Gramsci recognized that hegemony can never be complete, and that struggles for ideological control will always exist- among ruling class as well as among the proletariat (Slattery, 2003).

Rogers (2006) outlines as a central contribution of the concept of hegemony to communication theory its breaking down of the persuasion/coercion binary, demonstrating how individuals and groups ‘‘willingly’’ participate in their own subordination due to powerful influences over what is ‘‘taken for granted’’ and naturalized .

Following a classical Marxist approach, it could have been analyzed that the shift in the racial codes of the *Tewahdo* Church is a reflection of the power hierarchy of the dominant colonizing class on the subordinated colonized mass based on the dissemination of a false consciousness that sets the Caucasian as the superior and rightful holder of privilege. The consent given by the clergy and the followers of the church in embracing the foreign iconographic system, however, stands as an indication of consent for the voluntary assimilation of the liturgical culture of the Italian colonial regime. Almost in its entirety, the dynamics of the relationship governing assimilation of Italian iconography into the *Tewahdo* Church’s liturgical sphere was not coercive in its nature and. The subordinated society and their church have wilfully incorporated Caucasian Christian iconography into their liturgical sphere, despite the *Tewahdo* Church’s long resistance and friction with the Italian and other European colonial incursions in the region for the last half millennia.

The views of Louis Althusser help to explain why the subordinated *Tewahdo* society consented in incorporating the new visual language. Althusser opposes the Classical Marxist class reductionism in ideology- the notion that there is some guarantee that the ideological position of a social class will always correspond to its position in the social relations of production. Althusser analyzes ‘ideology’ as interpellation of individuals who accept subjection and submit freely to the

commandments of the subject (Lenin, 2001). Such underlying principles that determine the production of art work conceal and mask the dominant ideology in a society fall under what he refers to as Ideological State Apparatus. He draws a line between ideological state apparatuses, including the family, the school, the church, or the media - which use ideology to spread and integrate dominant ideologies and the repressive state apparatuses, which include the police, the army and the prisons - which uses violence. Althusser(2006) maintained the view that ideology does not exist in the form of "ideas" or conscious "representations" in the "minds" of individuals. Rather, ideology consists of the actions and behaviors of bodies governed by their disposition within material apparatuses. Althusser views that ideology forms as organization of signifying practices constituting human beings as social subjects, linking them to values and ideas highlighted by the ruling. In other words, ideology enables the ruling class to attain the willful submission of the exploited or colonized masses.

Terry Eagelton who echoes the beliefs of Althusser defines "ideology" as close to "culture", in that it means the "whole complex of signifying practices and symbolic processes in a particular society." Eagleton points that ideology promotes and legitimizes interests of dominant groups and ideas that legitimate their interests specifically by distortion and dissimulation (Eagleton,1991).

The political significance of the "Whitening" of iconographs is that the ideological labor, (conscious or otherwise) behind the substitution of the black iconographic artifacts with white representation is embedded in the perceived naturalness of racial superiority and submission experience. The process of naturalization functions in turning commodities to myths thereby de-politicizing and purifying objects, giving them an aura of a natural and eternal justification where they "appear to mean something by themselves" (Glassco, 2012).

In his essay "Myth Today", Ronald Barthes (1984) discusses the ideological nature of culture's underling myth and argues that every cultural product has meaning, and that this meaning is conditioned by ideology, and therefore any cultural

product can be the subject of mythological analysis and review. Barthes terms as "myth" the manner in which a culture signifies and grants meaning to the world around it. Myth for Barthes is a realm of second class signification which could be seen as a cultural association, to distinguish from denotation. For Barthes, myths have the ideological function of naturalizing the cultural or making particular values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely 'natural' (Edwards, 2007). Barthes' work steps further from earlier Marxist critique based on class relations, into analyzing the role of ordinary discourses as semiotic mechanisms in the controlling of group thinking and oppression.

Barthes follows the views of Michelle Foucault that all objects must necessarily be discursive or formed out of language. In his work "The Archaeology of Knowledge," Foucault had insisted that the focus should be put on how an object was constructed out of discourse rather than in studying so much of the object itself. This approach has laid ground for a new approach in the humanities and cultural studies by shifting from historical approach of searching for origin into the study of how discourses and languages that set meaning of events and objects come into being. The mechanics of discursive formation, as it were and how the discourse was created had to be studied without being concerned about what "truth" content the discourse might or might not contain (Willette, 2014).

This research also follows the stated approach of studying the discourse of *Tewahdo* Church's iconography, rather than delving into the 'historical' study of the objects (icons) or the quantitative reporting of the objects of 'Black' *Tewahdo* iconographs and 'White' Caucasian chromolithographs. Rather, the study attempts to understand the shifts and reformation of the iconographic discourse as a language over time by studying the conventional signifiers used in the visual language and how the set of signifiers that belong to the 'Caucasian' iconography system of meaning formation were incorporated into the *Tewahdo* iconographs. The archaeological approach in this study will analyze signifiers in the discourse of *Tewahdo* Church's iconography and how these signifiers are attributed with different codes of meaning.

This approach builds up on Foucault's discipline of locating power relationships in the patterns of knowledge creation or discourses. Foucault maintains that a given discourse is the manifestation of power, and importantly he points that a discourse can rather function in undermining and resisting power on the opposite end:

> "Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it… We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart" (Foucault, 1998).

3.3 Encoding and Decoding of Cultural Signifiers

Cultural dominance takes to effect when elements of a dominant culture are utilized by members of a subordinated culture with a relative lack of choice, in which the dominant culture has been imposed on the subordinated one because of the dominant culture's greater political, cultural, economic, and/or military power. Cultural dominance assumes a common concept of cultures as separate and clearly bounded entities akin to nation states. It is characterized by the unidirectional imposition of elements of a dominant culture onto a subordinated (marginalized, colonized) culture (Rogers, 2006) This imposition that Antonio Gramsci conceptualizes as naturalization, takes effect through control of cultural practices to suit the attitudes, ideas, beliefs and conventions of the dominant groups.

British sociologist Stuart Hall's analysis on ideology and cultural practice places cultural production at the forefront of socio-economic and political power. His approach does not assume the full transfer of meanings from dominant groups onto passive or ideologically interpolated subordinated groups. Hall's analyses give prominence to the dynamics of the meaning making process, where by active processes occur both at the encoding and decoding levels. Following Althusser, Stuart Hall argues that media appear to reflect reality whilst in fact they construct it,

in his discussions regarding the making of meaning from media texts (Chandler, 1994). He, thus, makes distinction between reflection and representation of meaning:

> "Representation is a very different notion from that of reflection. It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping; not merely the transmitting of an already existing meaning, but the more active labor of making things mean" (Hall, 1982).

Hall's major theoretical premises are founded on his argument that texts/images are always associated with power, and that texts/images have different meanings or no meaning at all. Hall's theory of encoding/decoding is based on the principle that there is a correlation between a person's social situation and the meanings the person decodes from an encoded image or discourse. Hall argues that a perfect hegemony is not necessarily attained due to the tensions that can arise from the viewer's social situation and the image/discourse's meaning. Here, he differs from Althusser by emphasizing on diversity of responses to media texts rather than assuming one dominant reading. For Hall, the media do tend to reproduce interpretations which serve the interests of the ruling class, but they are also a field of ideological struggle' (Woollacott, 1982). The influence of Gramsci's on Hall's theory is reflected on his resolve of active struggle of conflicting interests rather than assuming total domination of the subordinate classes.

Hall contends that although the dominant ideology is inscribed as 'preferred reading' in a media text, viewers may adapt different stances in decoding the text. Although Hall speculated that there could also be other positions, initially, his model had three social positions: dominant, oppositional, and negotiated. 'Dominant' readings are produced by those whose social situation favors the preferred reading; 'negotiated' readings are produced by those who inflect the preferred reading to take account of their social position; and 'oppositional' readings are produced by those whose social position puts them into direct conflict with the preferred reading (Hall, 1980).

Hall gives prominence to power relations (political, economical or social) in the encoding and decoding processes as the determinants of ways of representation and making of meanings. Hall stressed that dominant codes that favor the interests of the ruling class tend to invoke the dominant meaning by striving to appear obvious and normal:

> "Certain codes may... be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed - the effect of an articulation between sign and referent - but to be 'naturally' given. Simple visual signs appear to have achieved a 'near-universality' in this sense: though evidence remains that even apparently 'natural' visual codes are culture-specific. However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather, that the codes have been profoundly *naturalized"* (Hall,1980).

Hall's contribution to the study of semiotics has been monumental particularly for his design of the encoder/decoder model. Traditionally, mass-communications research had conceptualized the process of communication in terms of a circulation circuit or loop. This model has been criticized for its linearity –sender / message / receiver – for its concentration on the level of message exchange and for the absence of a structured conception of the different moments as a complex structure of relations (Hall, 1980). Hall points to the flaws of such communication models based on the sender – message –receiver structure by arguing that (i) meaning is not simply fixed or determined by the sender, (ii) the message is never transparent, and (iii) the audience is not passive recipient of meaning (Procter, 2004). Hall's model of mass communication rejects textual determinism, noting that 'decodings do not follow inevitably from encodings' and insists on the importance of active interpretation within the codes (Hall, 1980).

Hall bases his model on the premise that there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code. Both states of coding (encoding and decoding), which Hall refers to as 'moments' are built as meaning structures by the combination of ' frameworks of knowledge', 'relations of production' and 'technical infrastructure' to result in the making of meaning of the text (Davis, 2004).

Whilst offering a range of interpretative stances in relation to the social positioning of readers or viewers in decoding a 'dominant' text, Hall's model is based on the assumption that the meaning of the text is encoded in the dominant code. This assumption does not put into account the different stances the encoders of texts might hold in relation to the dominant code's reflection of certain values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and practices. In other words, the encoders of messages may also exhibit different stances towards the dominant message that they are expected to encode.

If one considers the encoders of cultural text as subjects of social and political influence and pressure themselves, the three stances of decoding outlined by Hall may also be exhibited at the encoding level as well based on the social dispositions of the encoders of the cultural text. Thus, the encoders themselves actively engage in (i) encoding the preferred dominant text, or (ii) negotiated text, or (iii) oppositional text (counter-hegemonic) based on their social positioning.

In this study of *Tewahdo* Churches iconography, the encoding of images will also be analyzed from this approach by considering the differences in the utilization of 'Caucasian' signifiers in local iconography production. The range of encoding modes displayed through the use of racial signifiers such as skin color and hair will be observed. The encoders- in this case the artists and monks – will be noted as subjects under domination in the colonial and post colonial contexts. The relevance of this approach is based on the belief that the encoding of the paintings was not implemented through direct control by the Italian colonial structure; but rather through the ideological conventions of signification related to the social and economic power of the colonial Italian class as well as pre-existing predispositions of racial supremacy of the 'Caucasian'. Accordingly, the painters are assumed to have actively made their own responses to the dominant convention in the way they coded meaning in their iconographs. The active process of encoding encompasses transcribing, modifying or defying the widely dominant signifiers of Italian Christian iconographs.

3.4 Post Colonial Implications

Through studies of representation of race, ethnicity and nationhood, postcolonial theory analyses colonial dynamics and their aftermath on colonized societies. The scope of 'postcolonialism' encompasses the discourse of European colonization and its continued legacies after decolonization. Different literary and cultural studies have been undertaken about postcolonial discourses in relation to the themes of race, nation, subjectivity, power, subalterns, hybridity and creolization. Broadly speaking, postcolonial theory has concentrated on two the hub of domination–subordination and that of hybridity–creolization (Baker, 2004).

These studies have produced substantial breakthroughs in the understanding of current socio-political surfaces of post colonial nations by elucidating patterns of representation and cultural practices these societies continue to exhibit in defining their identities under the cloud of dominant colonial structure.

Instead of seeing colonialism as something locked in the past, Homi Bhabha demonstrates how its histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present, demanding that we transform our understanding of cross-cultural relations (Parsons & Hardling, 2012). Bhabha (1994) describes the situation where colonial subjects and their cultures view themselves as misfits in light of the colonial masters, and thus try to imitate the cultures and attitude of the colonizers (Bhabha, 1994). Thus to gain power the colonized copy the masters, intentionally suppressing their own culture.

Bhabha cites the rise of new cultural forms of *hybridity* and *mimicry* due to colonial histories in the past (Jim and Kelly, 2012). Hybrid cultural forms become visible in the post colonial culture as legacies when the subordinated groups mix elements of the dominant groups' culture into their own; or when they put an effort to copy the culture of the dominant group. Bhaha's views echo Frantz Fanon who had earlier maintained that the 'Black' Subject who has lost his native cultural origin develops consciousness of inferiority and puts effort to appropriate and imitate the culture of the colonizer.

In the ‘Fact of Blackness’, Fanon draws attention to the fact that dominated black people develop consciousness of their body, and get to face challenges of how they should represent it:

> “In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly. And all these movements are made not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge “(Ashcroft, 2003).

In such contexts, where racial distinctions are visible, the post-colonial subject’s superficial differences of the body and voice (skin color, eye shape, hair texture, body shape, language, dialect or accent) are read as indelible signs of the ‘natural’ inferiority of their possessors (Ashcroft, 2003). Such sort of consciousness experienced by the subordinated groups leads to substitution of the representations of certain features about their culture and bodies with those appropriated from the dominant culture. This phenomenon hypothetically stands as a factor behind *Tewahdo* iconography’s shift in the representation of devotional imagery through the substitution of black skin color with Caucasian; Afro hair with blonde white, thereby acknowledging a ‘natural’ inferiority of its possessors. A consciousness about Black skin is made visible in the meanings of inferiority and sinister character attributed to the skin color code in the iconographs.

As such, representation of the body in terms of skin color, hair, body structure has functioned as a signification system of particular characters and behaviors in the *Tewahdo* iconography. It has been made to signify particular meanings, at times serving to identify the characters of good from evil. Ironically, the black skin code was being encoded and decoded by readers who own the same black color and presumably consent in sharing the meaning that their skin color represents evil and that of the colonial rulers represents good. Here again, Stuart Hall’s views shed a light to understand the situation better in his statement that relational meanings are

contextually established in signifying fields. Hall (1997) draws from the views of Frantz Fanon analyzing the tendency to read the physical body as a signifier of cultural difference (Baker, 2014). He termed race "a floating signifier" through which racialized behavior and difference needs to be understood as a discursive, not necessarily a genetic or biological fact:

> "...race works like a language. And signifiers refer to the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture to its making meaning practices. And those things gain their meaning, not because of what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting relations of difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. Their meaning, because it is relational, and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation " (Hall, 1997).

Hall maintains that the body is a text formed by racial discourse. He insists on the need in focusing on the cultural construction that attributes meaning to the signifiers of a particular race. Hall points on classifying features such as skin color, body hair, and bone structure as signifiers of behavior, skills, and identity. He argues that, historically, the reading of the racial body has been built on discourses that correspond the cultural systems with those of natural systems. In other words, discourses about a particular body type render the justification of naturalizing the particular race's inferred behavior. Here also, Said refers to Fanon's analysis:

> "beneath ... the bodily and corporeal schema is another schema, a schema composed of the stories and the anecdotes and the metaphors and the images, which is really ... what constructs the relationship between the body and its social and cultural space" (Hall, 1997).

The work of the prominent postcolonial thinker Edward Said critiques the discourses of racial distinctions and hierarchies that form hegemonic relationships between what he terms as the Occident (West) and the Orient (East). His work is located in the postmodern theory of representation and building on Michelle Foucault's elaboration of discourse, Said undertakes a post-structuralist reading of

the discourses of text and representation of the Orient describing how certain signifiers get connected to signifieds to create the ordering system of 'race'.

Following Foucault, Said argues that discourse works to create 'knowledge' about a supposed 'racial group' (Klages, 2006), although he differs from Foucault in following a structuralist approach by setting up a formal opposition between the "East" and "West" (Willette, 2014). Said has maintained his contention that *Orientalism* is the creation of the Orientals (the writers, anthropologists, poets, artists of the West) and that the constructed discourse is an unreal creation that only serves to gratify the needs of the Occident to define itself by comparing itself with the attributes of the "inferior", "feminine", and "barbaric" Orient.

> "…as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West" (Said, 1995).

What Fanon, Hall and Said have reiterated in their arguments is that superficial body differences are read as signifiers of particular meanings in a structure of power hierarchy; where those signifiers function as cultural and historical categorizing tools with arbitrary meanings. Their core analytical focus lies in understanding racial categorizations through analyses and articulation of body differences as signifiers of meaning in the discourses of historical, social and political contexts.

It is only through discursive analysis that it can be reached to a broader understanding of racial coding and how it gains its meaning. The use of words and images as signifiers is charged with meanings of racial hierarchies and ideologies that make the body assume the role of a lingual signifier. Like in any other lingual system, a reader wouldn't be able to read the text the body represents unless the reader is already familiar with that language built upon a hegemonic discourse. This discourse is built mainly by what Althusser terms as the 'Ideological State Apparatus', the cultural and social practices that inculcate ideological orientations in the subordinated/colonized society. Pre-existing views of racial hierarchies in the

Tigrinya society and the enforcement of the *Italianata* (Italization) project of the colonial government and its institutions - schools, churches and other bodies- all contribute in the building of the discourse of racial superiorities and inferiorities, determining the meaning making of the iconographs.

3.5. Previous Studies on Tewahdo Iconographs:

Tewahdo church's iconography in Eritrea remains largely an unexplored research topic and there is a dearth of available literature in the field. Few studies, mostly in art history, have been undertaken in the Ethiopian regarding religious art and visual expression. Maryilin Eiseman Heldman (1994) extensively explored the works of a 15th century Ethiopian iconographic painter Fre Seyon. Heldman's analysis of pictorial sources of Fre Seyon's iconographs locates stylistic affinities and traces of appropriation to Byzantium models and Italian "Quatrocentto" (1400's) paintings. Although the findings of the research were limited to the work of one artist, the study substantiates early influences of both Byzantium and Italian paintings Christian art in Ethiopia and Eritrea.[2]

Iconographs of St. Peter and St. Paul in *Akala Guzay*, Eritrea, have been matched with portraits of St.Peter and St. Paul in *Kariye Camii* in Istanbul made before 1335; and a 14th century Constantinopolitan icon of St. Peter and St. Paul at *Mount Sinai* (Heldmann 1994). Church paintings of Fre Seyon have been explained to exhibit strong resemblance with devotional paintings in Tuscan (Italy) by Heldmann. She identifies the significance of the painter's exposure to Italian paintings as the inspiration for developing a style that shifted from previous patterns of local iconography:

[2] Despite the fact that many of the sites in research are in Eritrea, the author- Heldman refers to all the locations as Ethiopian in his book. This could be due to the reason at the time of data collection Eritrea had not gained its independence from Ethiopia during the research, although during the publication f the book in 1994 Eritrea was already an independent state.

> "...it is likely that Fre Seyon had seen at least a few Tuscan devotional images. The vertical shape and grand scale of the Dega and Rema panels were inspired by the Tuscan altarpiece painted with a full-length Madonna Enthroned. This form developed in Italy during the thirteenth century...Fre Seyon must have seen a Tuscan altarpiece or learned of this form from a visiting Italian" (Heldman, 1994).

The author indicates that the iconographer had likely "seen" Italian devotional images to have been influenced to incorporate the style in his work. This highlighting of the experience of "seeing" indicates exposure of the painter as a subject to the Italian system of iconographic signification. Heldman (1994) acknowledges the painter's departing from the local tradition of iconographic system and commends him for being "visually and intellectually stimulated by foreign works of art" . This statement is also charged with the connotation that embracing the European style of iconographic tradition could have been considered as an intellectual ascent for an artist. In fact, this very same attitude of prestige could have been a motive for the painters to assimilate Italian iconographic patterns.

Brianna Simmons' (2009) research focuses on the use of religious images by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and their effect on the construction of an Orthodox identity. Simmons (2009) suggests that Ethiopian Orthodox Christian practitioners have adopted religious chromolithographs into their worship because they fit easily into a system of pre-established cultural aesthetics and that the actual style of the depiction of the Holy figures is less important than their ability to be recognized.

Driving from interviews with clergy and followers of the Church, Simmons gets into concluding that shifts in style or skin color of the iconographs do not hold much meaning in the church, as the key importance is given to the function as mediums of prayer regardless of style. This disregard for style shifts can be interpreted that negotiated and oppositional decoding of the Caucasian iconographs do not have much bearing in the context, and that viewers mostly decode the meanings in the dominant mode. This implies that viewers either fail or do not put an

effort to give value to differences in iconographic signification systems as long as they are able to recognize the meaning of the paintings.

Her findings also show that most of the chromolithographs are given to the churches as acts of piety and that chromolithographs are preferred more than paintings by the donors because of their lower cost and greater availability (Simmons, 2009). This insight contributes in adding economic rational as a factor behind the popularity of Caucasian chromolithographs. None the less, the price factor does not entirely explain why indigenous *Tewahdo* printed duplicates have not been able to get the same popularity as the Caucasian duplicates nor why local painters chose to make Caucasian iconographs based on references of Italian devotional paintings.

Similarly, Raymond Silverman (2009) who did a research about mechanically produced prints in Ethiopia notes that the faithful give chromolithographs to churches as acts of piety and spiritually engage them within the church in ways virtually the same as the practices associated with traditional media. His findings highlight the little significance of whether or not the image is a unique (handmade) original or a printed copy to most Orthodox Christians (Silverman, 2009). He states his observations about commoditization of religious objects and their removal from the churches and stripping of their spiritual essence as they are made to circulate in the global market and private homes. He further notes that on the contrary, mechanical reproductions (chromolitographs) are decommoditized, revalued and transformed into objects of devotion in churches and homes of the faithful (Silvermann, 2009).

Silvermann's research also supplements Heldman's (1994) location of the sources of European devotional art in the 14th and 15th century in Ethiopia. Silvermann has been able to situate the sources of devotional imagery since the 16th century by identifying the key templates and engravings that local painters had been using as references in their works. In particular, he traces copies of a book titled

"Evangelicae Historiae Imagines" that was brought by the Jesuits at the end of the sixteenth century, and also an Arabic translation of the Four Gospels.

The above mentioned studies are substantial for the current research as they lay the foundation for the influences of early Italian religious painting on *Tewahdo* Church iconography. This research will step ahead into investigating the ideological impacts of these influences in the encoding of iconographical text. The approach of postcolonial analysis in the current research has been possible at this stage by building upon the findings of the above studies. As the Italian influence has been asserted in these studies, the research will not delve in tracing the origins of influence, but will rather move into the semiological readings of different *Tewahdo* iconographs and attempt to categorize the modes of encoding in light of the culturally dominant Italian coding style. The study will carry a close analysis of the language of iconography used by pointing to particular body signifiers; and how such signifiers have been attributed with particular meanings.

4. FIELD REPORT AND DISCUSSION

Mainly with the consecutive advent of European missions and Italian colonization in Eritrea Tewahdo iconography metamorphosed as whitening of skin depiction of holy figures and incorporating Western art conventions became popular. Since the inception of Tewahdo iconography around 8th century A.D. local iconographers had been engaged in actively selecting and omitting particular elements from various sources of influence including Syria, Egypt, Nubia (now in Sudan), and Roman Christian imagery. Tewahdo iconography has always been a visual culture of replication and careful copying of worship imagery. As stated by Stanislaw Chojnacki (1973) the study of the Tewahdo iconographs is essentially, the study of these culturally significant efforts of iconographers in adopting influences in accordance with their attitudes and beliefs. These influences and their ideological significance should also be perceived in relation to Barthes' (1984) notion that every cultural product has meaning conditioned by ideology and thus can be the subject of mythological analysis and review.

The comparative observation conducted in four churches and two studios in this study has proven a definite influence of Caucasian imagery particularly from Italy on the encoding methods of the religious iconographs. The presence of Caucasian imagery in the worship spaces is primarily visible in the form of the mechanically reproduced chromolithographs and their painted copies in the churches.

The amount of such Caucasian images in the churches has been increasing with time as more chromolithographs are gifted to the church by worshipers. A significant impact of these Caucasian chromolithographs is their function as models for painted copies. Particular images like that of St. Michael defeating Satan have been replicated from copies of original Italian paintings and went through a number of cycles that involve mechanical duplication and latter manual replication.

Data observation was conducted in four sites that were selected in accordance with the prevailing types of iconographs they hold. The selection of sites took into

account the need to include churches that have indigenous Tewahdo style iconographs, hybrid iconographs, and Caucasian iconographs respectively. The insight provided by the key informants in the research was helpful in the selection of these sites.

These sites range from *Enda Mikiel* church, located in a rural setting to *Enda Yesus* church, located in a relatively affluent district in the capital city Asmara. The site visits conducted in the four churches encompassed photographing of hundreds of iconographs in every site. In accordance with the scope of the research, particular photographs of iconographic paintings have been selected for analysis in each church. One reason for the selection of these particular images discussed in the current chapter was the fact of their relevance for the scope of the study and their representativeness of the overall trend of style shift being studied. In particular, the observation has focused on differences in the use of signifiers in the depiction of particular characteristics of good and evil.

The use of racial body signifiers and its association with particular types of characters is focused upon to provide basis for the analysis of ideological implications vis-à-vis the colonial hegemony. The comparison mainly focuses on iconographs made by local painters and tries to analyze the meanings attributed to external body signifiers of the Caucasian and the African body types.

4.1. *Enda Mikiel* Church *Adi Rae'si*

The church of *Enda Mikiel* in the village of *Adi Rae'si* in the south of Asmara is one of the few churches in Eritrea that have retained Tewahdo style iconographs until date. The dominantly Tewahdo styled imagery that characterizes *Enda Mikiel* church generally reflects the culture and identity of the indigenous Tigrinya through simplified two dimensional illustrations. The stylistic affinities, the skin color and dressing styles all conform to the conventions of old Tewahdo iconography. Racial body types in particular have not been in use as signifiers of identity, since the depicted characters do not bear racial distinctions in their looks.

Figure 4.1. Tewahdo Marian iconograph at *Enda Mikiel* church, *Adi Raesi.*

The encoding in these Tewahdo iconographs does not bear distinctions between races in characterization of behavior. Personages-both holy and evil are consistently depicted with the same skin color, hair and costume representations. The iconograph of the massacre of children in Galile by King Herod[3] is one example (Figure 4.2). The Biblical narrative depicts the execution of all young male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem upon orders of the king. In the iconograph, the king is seen giving an order to a soldier while another man beats drums on the right; and below the king, a council of men are depicted discussing – one of them pointing to the soldier with a sword stained in blood and beheaded children lying under him. His hands stretch snatching a baby from the arms of a woman, while another woman covers her face crying.

[3] King Herod was a Roman appointed king of Jews who ordered the slaughtering of every male infant in an attempt to kill Jesus Christ, fearing he was the newborn King of Jews. (Muller, 2008)

Figure 4.2 *The Massacre of children of Galile*. At Enda Mikiel church, Adi Raesi

The painting, typical of traditional Tewahdo representation, illustrates the biblical scene in a simplified manner with less regard for proportion, perspective and dimension. The background is deliberately made vacant, painted in orange-brown and the ground is painted in green. All characters look essentially the same. The identity of characters and intended meaning to guide image is coded in two parallel ways. First, an anchor statement states the intended meaning and guides the viewer. The text, written in the old liturgical language *Geez*, says "ዘከመ፣አዘዘ፣ ሄረዶስ፣ ይቅትሉ፣ህጻናት፣ገሊላ" (Herod orders the killing of the children of Galile). The text sets the subject of the scene and the identity of the characters, and attempts to fix the meaning of the image.

Meaning is also guided by particular signifiers of paraphernalia - material tools, dress codes and actions. The identity of the king is inferred by his throne, that of the officer by the cane he is holding and that of the soldier by the sword he is carrying. Besides, body posture and status symbols provide indication of identities of characters and their social positioning. The group of men sitting down below the king and discussing are identifiable as his council. The crying women of Galile; the beheaded children; and the baby in the arms of the mother all become recognizable mainly by the actions they are depicted performing.

In addition to the use of anchorage text to guide meaning making, identities of characters and meaning have been encoded by signifiers of facial orientation, non human skin colors, paraphernalia and action.

The painting (Figure 4.2) uses facial orientation as a signifier of character of good and evil. This style of depiction which has been commonly used in Tewahdo church iconography portrays the face of the holy and the good frontally. The nonracial signifier, facial orientation is used selectively by portraying the faces of evil characters and sinners sideways. The faces of the good and the holy are always depicted frontally.

In the painting of the massacre in Galile, the faces of King Herod, his council and soldiers are all portrayed sideways; and on the other hand the faces of the beheaded children and the mothers are all depicted frontally. Facial orientation, as an indicator of character, is given more prominence and at times rules of proportion and perspective are defied to give priority to the prominence of the facial orientation in the iconographs. This tradition of facial orientation renders meaning through the convention of 'reversal philosophy' described by Tibebesslassie Tigabu as follows:

> … it is not only the viewers who observe the paintings; the paintings also observe the viewers. The saints were painted in reversal gaze so as to hypnotize the onlooker, which also used what is known as the frontal technique. To avoid the reversal gaze and to depict sinful and devilish people, the painters used the profile technique by drawing only one eye (Tigabu, 2014).

The personages in the painting are depicted with similar attributes of skin color and hair. Good and evil are not related to body features in the painting. All subjects are depicted with light brown skin color, almond eyes, and short hair. Typically, the subjects have the physical looks of the local Tigrinya population with Semitic-resembling thinner noses, bigger eyes, tighter lips and Afro hair. Their body depiction is complemented by the familiar dressing and material apparatus used in the culture (e.g. the king's crown, the decoration of his apparel, the drum and the sword).

Figure 4.3. Martyrdom of St. Jacob and St. Luke;
Enda Mikiel church, *Adi Raesi*.

The same pattern is observed in murals depicting martyrdom of evangelists. The identity of the evangelists in the murals in the iconograph of St. Jacob and St. Luke (Figure 4.3) is fixed by anchor text that depicts their martyrdom. St. Jacob is depicted seated while a man strikes him with bat as blood splatters from his forehead. Both the evangelist and the killer are represented by the same looks of the local *Habesha*. In this case also, neither skin color nor hair or any other body signifier represents a particular deed.

Similarly, in the painting of the beheading of St. Luke, both the saint and the slayer are represented with the same light skinned black skin color and grey hair. St. Luke is depicted kneeling down with his hands tied as he is beheaded. In both paintings the slayers are depicted sideways and the holy men are depicted in full frontal profile. St. Jacob's face is turned towards the viewer so that his full frontal sight is caught by the viewer. St. Luke's falling head is aligned to face the viewer in full frontal position as well.

In some murals where a depiction of the devil is made, there is a peculiar use of skin color to signify identity of the devil and sinners in hell. In the murals consistently showing the same light brown skin color for contradicting characters, the blue color is used as the skin color of a monster that devours sinners in hell, and the condemned souls in hell (see figures 4.4(a) & 4.4(b)). The same use of blue color is also noted in a series of murals at the University of Asmara[4] that were painted with a similar style (Figure 4.4(b)). The blue chained monster has been a standardized depiction in Tewahdo iconographs in Eritrea and Ethiopia as also noted in older Tewahdo style paintings in Ethiopia such as the 14th century monastery of *BeteGiorgis* (St. George) and Church of *Debra Berhan Selassie*, Gondar (Lumley, 2010; House, 2012). This is most likely related with early iconographic depiction of Satan with blue color in the pre-middle age European tradition, as the color blue was conceived as the least divine color due to the reason that it was "the color of the

[4] Although the exact date the paintings were made is unknown, the University was established in 1958.

closest heaven humankind could see" (Feree, 1993). These murals depict the scene of judgment in Hell where lamenting naked sinners also depicted in blue are taken by devils to a shackled monster that devours them. St. Michael and George, who are depicted with light brown color and Afro hair are seen rescuing the holly and the just who are clothed (Figure 4.4 (b)). Similar bestial figures have also been noted in Byzantium iconography as a manifestation of Satan albeit with variations in outward depictions in different animal forms (Jones et. al, 2013).

Figure 4.4.(a) Scene in Hell. Human eating monster and Sinners signified with blue skin colors; *Enda Mikael* church *Adi Raesi.*

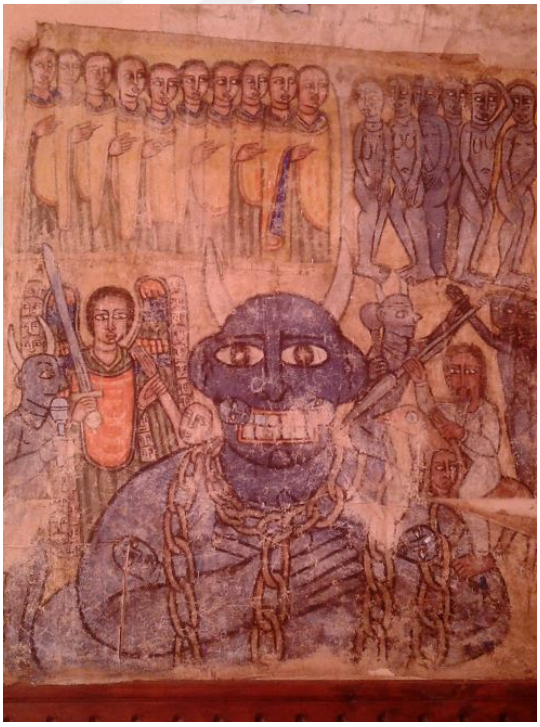


Figure 4.4. (b) Angels and the holy depicted with local body features and clothing; Canvas at University of Asmara

Like all other Tewahdo churches, *Enda Michael* Church also houses chromolithographic prints. The chromolithographs that are mostly gifted to the churches by worshipers depict the holy personages as Caucasian. These are

mechanical duplicates and painted reproductions mainly of St. Mary, Jesus and St. Michael that have increasingly become dominant in worship spheres. Such images are mostly smaller in size (than the murals) and are usually temporarily placed in front of the murals, until they get replaced by bigger or fancier chromolithographs (Figure 4.5.).

Multiple prints and painted reproductions of the image of St. Michael slaying Satan are positioned in front of the Tewahdo murals in the church. These prints are distinct in style from the Tewahdo murals and are depicted in naturalistic/realistic manners (in contrast to the two dimensional illustrative Tewahdo depiction). The original source of these duplicates is a Baroque painting "Archangel Michael fighting the Devil" by Italian painter Guido Reni made in 1635 (Figure 4.6.(a)). The painting depicts St. Michael as a strong Caucasian male with stretched wings and a sword on his right hand. His left heel forces Satan's face to the ground as he defeats him in a battle.

Figure 4.5. Gifted iconographs placed in front of Tewahdo iconographs, gaining more visibility at *Enda Michael* Church of *AdiRaesi*.

The original Italian painting does not attribute meaning through racial signifiers. Both the angel and the devil are depicted similarly as Caucasian- apart from the angel's depiction as blond haired and the devil as dark haired. Nonetheless, they are essentially Caucasian ruling out the doubt about use of Black skin racial signifiers. Rather, the painter interplays stature, glamour as well as use of wings and chains to signify distinctions between the opposing bodies of good and evil. St. Michael has large white wings that resemble those of a dove's and stretched horizontally across the frame. The defeated devil on the ground has smaller wings that look more of a bat's with dark green color (Figure 4.6. (a)).

On the contrary, locally painted reproductions of the original Reni painting do not follow the above mentioned signifiers the original Italian painter used. A reproduced painting in the interior of the church (Figure 4.6. (b)) does not replicate the attributes of Caucasian male Satan in the original. Instead, horns on the forehead and sharp claws on the finger are added in the reproduction. What is observed in this case is the reluctance to represent evil as a white male. Although the Caucasian male in the original Baroque painting was replicated, augmenting horn and claws to avoid make a distinction with a "normal" Caucasian male type, which is solely used to represent the good and holy.

Figure 4.6(a) Original Painting St. Michael defeating Satan. By Guido Reni.

Figure 4.6(b) A modified replica gifted by worshipers at *Enda Michael Adi Raesi.*

Figure 4.6(c) Artist Frezghi Fseha's iconograph being painted.

During one of the site visits Frezghi Fesseha, a mainstream artist who also works independently painting icons and decorating churches was working on the same painting of St. Michael slaying Satan. He was using a colored print as a reference for his canvas painting (Figure 4.6.(c)). Frezghi had made slight changes from the model he was using in the sketch that stood in the middle of his studio. In the sketched outline on the canvas, he had added other body signifiers as a technique of portraying Satan using a pair of forehead horns and sharp finger claws. Although Frezghi did not depict Satan as a black male, he did not copy the original faithfully in depicting a 'normal' muscular white male.

4.2. *Enda Mariam* Church Asmara

Enda Mariam (St. Mary church) is the most prominent Tewahdo church in the Eritrean capital Asmara and its environs, built in 1938 at the height of the strengthening of Italian colonial grip in the region. The church constructed integrating both Italian and Axumite architecture, holds key importance for Tewahdo worshipers who honor and worship St. Mary as the most vital saint in the faith.

Like the other Tewahdo churches, Enda Mariam's interiors are fully adorned with iconographic paintings that give vivid depictions of evangelical scenes and didactic illustrations of evil and holiness. Many of the murals in the church were painted by a family of local iconographers known as the *Sereke Brhan* family (Ghidey, 2014, oral interview), although other artists including Menghistu Cherinet (Ethiopian artist) also painted a number of the iconographs in the church.

St. Mary's iconographs are particularly important in the Tewahdo faith as the tradition of making Christian icons is believed to have been started after the Evangelist Luke made an icon of St. Mary that later did miracles and has been worshiped ever since (Mehari, 2014, oral interview). The Lucan 'original' that is believed to be in Jerusalem, although Ethiopians claim they have three Lucan paintings (Heldmann, 1994), is valued in the Tewahdo church as a revered worship object and beauty. *Qeshi* (priest) Mehari Mussie, head of heritage and antiquities in the Eritrean Orthodox Church in Asmara points that all iconographs made of St. Mary cannot attain the beauty of the icon made by the apostle Lucas. Aesthetic beauty of St. Mary is highly valued in the Tewahdo church and the Tigrinya society. The phrase "she looks like Mary" *ማርያም ትመስል*" signifies that a woman is very gorgeous, and importantly light skinned. Lighter skinned complexion is considered beautiful and in religious sense divine. All iconographs made of St. Mary are thus expected to meet the glamour of the Caucasian Mary which has been made familiar with different chromolithographs of Caucasian Marian models in all churches (Figure 4.8).

Most of the iconographs of St. Mary in Enda Mariam church in Asmara are chromolithographs that were donated by worshippers. Qeshi (priest) Mehari states that the church does not oppose Caucasian depiction of St. Mary as long as it is beautiful and imitates the divine glamour (2014, oral interview). However, some artists make "our Mother look like a human person- that we do not accept," says Aba Qeshi, citing an example where an artist painted St. Mary with a typical Tigrinya braided hair and gold necklace that made her look like a ሕጽይቲ *'hitsiyti'* (fiancée). It might be possible thus the Caucasian look and dressing of St. Mary came to be preferred as a divine and worthy depiction than the Tigrinya look that was regarded as ordinary and worldly. Similar esteem had also been given to Marian iconographs brought by the Jesuits in the earlier centuries, as the foreign images were considered as more holy than locally produced iconographs according to Heldmann (2005).

But what is the genuine skin color of Biblical figures like Mary and Jesus Christ? Semitic, Caucasian, Black? There are contesting claims about skin color among Christian scholars and theologians. Colin Kidd (2005) in his analysis of racial imagination in Christianity argues that there is no theological or scientific rationale behind the Caucasian depiction of Christianity. For example, neither the physical beauty nor the racial identity of St. Mary is outlined in the Christian Bible. As Kidd contends, the racial depiction of Christian figures is a matter of contesting representation as opposed to presentation. In other words, the visual imagination of Biblical figures is a result of a Eurocentric appropriation, and Kidd mentions other equally legitimate visual imaginations of racial identity including those of Rastafarian cult of Jamaica who identify:

> "all black people as the true children of Israel, and they regard the Bible as the history of the black African race, a history which has been appropriated and perverted by Europeans in order to deceive and oppress black people" (Kidd, 2006).

Besides the impact of mass distributed Roman imagery, Italian artists in colonial Eritrea also left their imprint in the prominence of the Caucasian visual representation in churches. According to artist Ghidey Ghebremicael (2014, oral

interview), Italian painters in Asmara had an important role 'modernizing' the style and motifs of iconographic depiction. He says that he used to work as an assistant when he was a young boy with an Italian *Cappucini* painter who painted iconographs in *Kidane Mihret* church in Asmara, and that the experience influenced him in his career later.

The main exterior wall of *Enda Mariam* for example, was painted by Italian painter Nenne Sanguineti Poggon request of the clergy, in the 1950s. These set of seven mosaic panels display a style distinct from earlier Tewahdo iconographic representations. The paintings exhibit a hybrid nature combining elements of Tewahdo Art and modern style. The thin long body statures of Saint Mary and the other angels depicted in the mosaic panels are distinct from Tewahdo style of body representation of round faces and shorter stature. The panels maintain several elements of Tewahdo art like short/afro hair, almond eyes, and more importantly black skin color.

Figure 4.7. Exterior icons of St. Mary, angels and worshipers at *Enda Mariam* Church, Asmara.

On a closer look though, the chief painting of St. Mary and child is different from the other six panels adjacent to it on both sides (Figure 4.7). While in all the six paintings the angels and praying women are depicted with dark toned brown skin and short afro hair, the Marian painting features St. Mary with Caucasian skin and white mantle typical of Roman Catholic iconography. The Italian artist's depiction of the angels and the praying women as Black persons was not maintained in the depiction of St. Mary. The key worship figure was made embodying a spiritual and moral superiority in relation to the subordination and worship endowed by the black worshipers and angels.

Such indirect articulation of racial order has been note remarked by Yaba Blay (2011) who contends that "European Christian structure of feeling" that became a tool of both European and White nationalism introduced irreconcilable aspects of blackness and whiteness by propagating the superiority of the white race and the need for subordination of the Blackness:

> " In the Manichean sense, then, whiteness, embodied by humanity, communicates moral and physical superiority. Conversely, blackness, the absence of whiteness, communicates inhumanity, immorality, and physical inferiority, divinely subjected to the dominance of God and/or His earthly counterpart -- man (read: White man)" (Blay, 2011).

Figure 4.8. A Caucasian chromolithograph of St. Mary and Child. At *Enda Mariam* Church, Asmara

Considering the Tewahdo church's adoption of the Caucasian and Creole Marian representation, comes the relevance of the Black Maddona (Black Mary) that is common in the Catholic nations. Statues are hardly used as worship objects in Eritrea. The Tewahdo church did not have its own statues prior to the introduction of Catholicism or after it. There are a handful of Black Madona's in Eritrea, mostly in Catholic churches. The most prominent, visited by Tewahdo worshipers is one in the church of *Mariam Dearit,* in the city of Keren. It is annually visited by thousands of pilgrims from the country. The blackness of the statue is not in taken literally however. The popular belief is that the statue of Black Mary was originally white, but was later blackened after Muslims had tried to burn down the church (Hill, 2008). It is due to this reasoning, and not for the belief that it was originally black, the Black Madona is accepted in the community. The church and the faithful who are

increasingly favoring the white Marian icons do not embrace black representation. This has not always been the case as indigenous Tewahdo iconographs, like the one in Adi Raesi depict St. Mary and child as black Semitic characters (Figure 4.1).

Evidently, there is a preference for White representation of holy figures in the Tigrinya. Frantz Fanon saw such cultural preferences for all things white as psychological symptoms of 'inferiorization'. This phenomenon is echoed in discourses of Black Nationalism that have always acknowledged that racism 'works' by encouraging the devaluation of blackness by black subjects themselves (Mercer, 1987).

Similarly, the perception that skin and hair that is closer to white are both more desirable attributes has been a dominant theme underlying the African American experience. Akintunde discusses about the wide belief among Black Americans regarding the whiteness of God, and their reluctance to imagine him as black, which he describes as a syndrome of self-hatred, where black Americans “have not only become victims, but also the perpetuators of their own social and psychological oppression “ (Akintunde, 1997).

Most of he murals in *Enda Mariam* church feature narrative depictions of characters with a Creole skin color and follow a combination of European and Tewahdo motifs. On one hand, facial orientation in relation to behavior representation follows the Tewahdo convention; and on the other hand, the paraphernalia and the settings depicted do not bear local identity. The painting style departs from earlier two dimensional Tewahdo iconography as it conforms with the rules of perspective, proportion, lighting and background details. According to artist Ghidey (2014, oral interview), the inclusion of dimension and proportion in the paintings came about as a result of exposure to the works of other Italian commissioned artists at the time and the desire of artists to modernize their style. Heldmann (1994) has also noted that such exposure to the works of earlier 14th century Italian art to have been major influences of style in the evolution of Tewahdo iconography.

Yet despite this step towards partial adoption of Italian style, the iconographs exhibit significant elements of the older Tewahdo art. As in the tradition of earlier Tewahdo depiction, racial distinction of evil and good is not exhibited. The holy figures were rather made to assume local Habesha looks by representing them with Afro hair and light brown (Creole) skin. Facial orientation which is commonly used as a signifier of character in Tewahdo art is commonly used in the iconographs in *Enda Mariam* Church, although that rule has been occasionally transgressed (look at the second image from the left where the slayer of St. Jacob is depicted frontally (Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.9 Hybrid murals featuring elements of both Tewahdo and Caucasian iconography *Enda Mariam* Church.

The representation of evil and Satan in these murals is made by the use of distinct body signifiers which are not associated with any particular race. In a painting of the temptation of Jesus Christ, Jesus is depicted with light brown skin, almond eyes – conforming to Tewahdo iconographic tradition (Figure 4.10). Satan is depicted sideways, typical of Tewahdo art principle, with addition of horns and bat wings.

Although Satan's grey skin color could be arguably resembled to black skin, a definite conclusion becomes uneasy, due to the rationale that brown skin color is used to represent holy characters as well in the other paintings by the artist Mengistu Cherinet. The choice of grey color could be the same motif of using non-human colors to represent evil.

Figure 4.10. Use of non human colors in depicting Satan. The Temptation of Christ, by Mengistu Cherinet, at *Enda Mariam* Church.

A painting by the same artist that depicts a light skinned black evangelist giving water to a dark skinned black 'slave' (Figure 4.11) highlights the range of skin hues the artist uses in representing black African appearances, diminishing the likelihood that the grey color was used to depict Satan with the African skin type. In other words, the holy character was depicted as a light brown figure, thus brown skin color could not have much significance of meaning in association with sin.

Yet, there is a distinct difference of depiction between the body type of the evangelist and the slave. The slave is represented with shorter kinky hair, bigger lips, dotted skin (associated with disease) and darker brown skin hue as opposed to the

light brown skin, Afro hair, and thinner nose used to represent the evangelist. This depiction reflects the racial and social distinctions between light skinned Semitic Africans and darker skinned Nilo-Saharans who have been subjugated and sold as slaves abroad. Such distinctions of the Habesha race and the dark skinned slaves in Tewahdo iconography have also been noted in *Betre Maryam* Lake Tana, Ethiopia in an iconograph that displays darker-skinned slaves as important possessions of aristocrats accompanying their mounted masters on barefoot (Teferi, 2013).

Figure 4.11 Iconograph that shows racial distinction between "Habesha" blackness and the Nilo-Saharan "Slave" blackness. Enda Mariam Church Asmara

The valorization of whiter skin is not only a symptom of 'inferiorization' (in Fanon's terms) by the colonized Tigrinya society, but also a reflection of racial prejudices regarding dark hued African skin. This is related with pre-existing ethno-racial distinctions in the Tigrinya that disfavor darker toned blackness and 'African' facial features by associating them with 'slave' (ባርያ) blood lines of the non-Semitic ethnicities who used to be enslaved and subordinated. The valorization of whitened skin and loathe of 'African' skin tone was not created, but was rather nurtured amidst the social and cultural hegemony of the white Italian colonization.

The Tigrinya owe their lighter shade of skin to the "Semitic strain of genetics [that] accounts somewhat for their more 'Caucasian' features" (Jenkins, 2006). They have always had a sense of superiority over Nilo-Saharan ethnicities and against other Tigrinya members who have a mix with these 'Black' communities. Mixing with these Nilo-Saharan groups who have darker skin shades and kinkier hair has been generally undesired. The "purer" the ancestry an individual claims- that is to have had no 'slave' or Nilo-Saharan ancestry or ancestry - the higher his/her status (Woldemikael, 2005). Ronald Hall (2008) who terms this kind of racism that exists among people of color based on the lightness or darkness of their skin tone as "Colorism" relates the phenomenon with the internalization of a white aesthetic ideal as a result of the historic legacy of slavery and colonialism and argues that many who were formerly colonized by Europeans have internalized the colonial and slavery value systems and learned to valorize light skin tones and Anglo facial features (Hunter, 2007).

The depiction of the slave represents features of darker skin, kinky hair, bigger lips that are commonly attributed to Nilo-Saharan Eritreans who live the western lowlands of the country. A person with such features is commonly teased with the term (Barya)'ባርያ'. *Barya* that used to be the name of the Nilo-Saharan group in North Western Eritrea was later changed to Nara, due to the derogatory connotations it implied. The term that has been used as a generic name for a slave in the Tigrinya, Tigre, Amharic, Bilin languages ethnicities refers to the darker skinned ethnicities who in the past were raided so heavily for captives by the Christian highlanders (Pankhurst, 1997; Campbell, 2007). The public perception of the *Barya* has been expressed in images and metaphors referring to disease, skin color, hair, behavior, epilepsy … etc (Tibebu, 1995).

> "Barya came to refer to an inherently inferior and servile person different in language, religion, ethnicity, and appearance from highland Ethiopians[and Eritreans] who spoke Amharic or Tigrinya, were Christian, and were of relatively light ("red" or qay)skin color "(Campbell et. al, 2007).

The shift of the meaning of the term that used to be the name of an ethnic group later came to mean a slave (ባርያ) was followed by a latter meaning to refer to a person with darker skin, attesting to the association of that blackness and slavery. A dark skinned person is lightheartedly called *Barya*, (slave) in the Tigrinya. The late Yemane Gebremichael, renowned Tigrinya singer for example, was more known by his nick name *Barya*, in reference to his dark hued blackness. Despite the political incorrectness of the word, it still signifies the existing associations of blackness and its assumed inferiority. On the other end of the spectrum having lighter skin is equated with beauty especially for women. The adjective *qeyah* (red) ቀያሕ which means light skinned is often synonymous with being beautiful in contrast with the adjective, *xelam* (dark/black) ጸላም which is insinuated as being ugly. The following sentence that was excreted from a Tigrinya novel (*Rosan Selien*) where an old lady advises her son about choosing a bride shows such connotations:

"ጓል ኣንስተይቲ እኮ ትቕያሕ ትጸልም ልዕሊ ኩሉ ውሕልነታን ጠባያን ኢዩ መልከዓ።"

which is literally translated as follows:

"Regardless of her redness (light skinned) or blackness, a woman's beauty is measured by her skills and character."

Here the term light skinned is synonymously used instead of 'beautiful', and blackness instead of 'ugly'. The rendered meaning is despite a woman's ugliness because of her black skin, the crucial thing is her character and her ability to do house work.

This standardization of beauty has commonly been associated with the imagined Caucasian skin of Saint Mary as mentioned earlier. St. Mary is assumed as the most beautiful woman, and the visualization of her beauty is based on the Caucasian representation. "Mariam timesl" ማርያም ትመስል (she looks like Mary) means that the woman is beautiful in the sense that she is white skinned.

Figure 4.12. A bride at the village of *Tsaeda-Kristian* is being groomed by her mother who is applying whitening make up to her face. [5] (Photo. by author).

Such claims of superiority based on skin stones have always existed in colonial settings related with the desire to claim higher social and political standings. Tigrinya families who claim that they are of pure descent call themselves "Chiwa" ቹዋ which also literally is related with "chiwinet" ቹውነት, which is translated as being cultured or civilized. Thus referring to a person who is descended from a family that is not "Chiwa" connotes that he/she is impure, uncivilized and from lower social class. Here, skin and bone types are used as means of categorizing people racially as "Chiwa" or otherwise. Stuart Hall (1997) refers such differences of color, hair, and bone as what everyone understands as visible racial differences is the foundation of racist philosophy.

If a family is identified as a non-Chiwa, it then would be assumed as impure and very often would be denied intermarriage with a Chiwa family. Such status

[5] Notice the Marian poster hanging on the wall behind. This Caucasian Marian model is considered the ideal beauty in the culture.

related classifications have been recounted by Stuart Hall (who was from a lighter skinned family) regarding his early experiences in Jamaica where significant distinctions between lighter skinned "mixed' brown Jamaicans and "blacks existed:

4.3. *Enda Giorgis* Church, Tiravolo Asmara

Constructed in 2004, *Enda Giorgis* church is one of the latest built churches in Asmara. It has been chosen as a site of observation mainly due to the fact that the religious paintings in the church are all recent and dominantly Caucasian, and thus can serve for a comparison with iconographs in the other churches. Enda Giorgis church mainly houses paintings that are replicas of chromolithographs and duplicates of Roman Baroque images. The main exterior wall of the church features a replica painting of St. George fighting a dragon, where the saint is depicted as a Caucasian figure with the outfits of a middle ages' Roman warrior (Figure 4.15 (a)). The iconographic representation differs from earlier Tewahdo portrayals as the costume of the saint in the painting is copied from the attires of Roman / medieval knights and is far different from local clothing and armor fashion. The soft long hair laid on his soldiers and his Caucasian skin color gives the saint a look that could not be farther from African. In the background, a lady in a blue wear and golden crown beholds the fight as she stands in front of what resembles a Greek/Roman building.

When this is compared with the depicted style in a painting of the same legend in a Tewahdo styled iconograph in *Enda Michael* church of *Adi Rae'si*, the shift in style becomes evident (Figure 4.13). Body signifiers in the two paintings differ visibly rendering contrasting identities of St. *Georgis* (George). In the older Tewahdo painting (Figure 4.13 (b)), the Afro hair style, almond eyes, brown skin color resemble that of a Tigrinya or Habesha male in general. His costume, bare feet, arrow and shield are typical of the way local Habesha warriors were dressed and armed in olden times.

Figure 13 (a). Caucasian iconograph of St. George at *Enda Giorgis* church , Asmara.

Figure 13 (b). Tewahdo iconograph of St. George at *Enda Michael* church, Adi Raesi.

The depiction of St. Giorgis in earlier Tewahdo iconography illustrates a legend of the saint and his heroic deed which is told in different versions across the Eastern Christian world. The local Eritrean rendering of the story describes a dragon that demanded first born children as tithe from a certain village a long time ago. The villagers, who had no choice, gave away their children by tying them to trees as the dragon commanded. One of the maidens was lucky enough to be rescued by St. *Georgis* who happened to be passing by. He slew the dragon and saved the maiden and the people (Tewelde, 2015).

For centuries this particular visualization has essentially been corner stoned on the visualization of the legend involving the story of the village, the saint, the maiden and the battle scene. The iconograph in *Adi Rae'si* reflects this imagination with the paraphernalia of the warrior saint including the arrows, the shield, and the horse's decoration thereby maintaining the visual identity of the saint as a local warrior saint who saved a local maiden. This also holds true due to the reason that the new Caucasian painting does not follow the local legend and misses / changes its key elements. An example of this is the replacement of the young maiden tied in a tree in

the Tewahdo iconographs by what looks like a crowned princess placed in front of a Roman/Greek building. The result of this endeavor is the vanishing of the proximity of the legend and the substitution of the local characters with Caucasian ones, giving the scene and characters assume a foreign identity.

All murals at the *Enda Giorgis* church are depicted in the Caucasian style in imitation of other chromolithograph models. These range from outdoor frescos of St. Mary to interior murals of *Crucifixion* and *the Last Supper* which were all reproduced from Caucasian style prototypes where all the identity of the Biblical characters was of Caucasian look and European setting.

Figure 4.14. Caucaian holy figures and setting in a canvas at Enda Giorgis church.

Ghidey Ghebremicael produces such replica iconographs by executing detailed copying of Caucasian models. During a visit to his studio, he and his aides were involved in replicating Caucasian iconographs from print copies that they use as

reference. The process they followed did not involve addition or omission of any of signifiers of meaning.

Ghidey admits that he often paints Satan with the features of a black male. He gives a rationalization that darkness is metaphor of bad things and light is metaphor of good things." He says "questioning the linking of black skin to Satan and worrying about it is a political maneuver and not suitable in religious contexts" (Ghidey, 2014, oral interview). He further provided an analogy that one panics during power black outs because darkness is terrifying. Ghidey did not consider his technique as having racial implications as he did not make distinction between darkness and the color black by his reasoning of the use of black skin color equating it with darkness.

On the other hand, artist Frezghi, who depicted Satan as a Caucasian figure in the iconograph of St. Michael (Figure 4.6.(c)) opposes the notion of depicting Satan as a black person. Frezghi (2014, oral interview), notes that darkness, as a metaphor of evil, is visible in the original Reni painting in the ground where the Satan had fallen; and that it was not on the skin color of Satan himself.

The differences regarding the understanding of darkness and its association with skin color between the artists are eminent behind the variations in racial depiction styles in the iconographs. In such post-colonial settings, the oppressed often embrace ideological constructions that negate blackness as a metaphor of evil, against the goodness of whiteness. Stuart Hall (1985) writes 'Black' is the term which connotes the most despised, the disposed, the unenlightened, the uncivilized, the uncultivated, the scheming, the incompetent, that it can be contested, transformed and invested with a positive ideological value. Fanon relates this dichotomy inherent in colonial mentality as symptomatic of 'Manicheanism'[6] by affirming that "the

[6] Manicheanism a doctrine based on the ideas of the Persian philosopher Manes, which saw the world as polarized between forces of absolute good and evil, symbolized in the oppositions of light and darkness, black and white" (Dyer, 1997).

colonial world is a Manichean world" where the colonizer paints the colonized as "sort of quintessence of evil" (Fanon, 2007). Such dichotomies are ideological Eurocentric constructions that are internalized and "epidermalized into consciousness, creating a fundamental disjuncture between the black man's consciousness and his body".

4. 4. *Enda Abune Aregawi* Church, Asmara

Located in the North Western district of Asmara, *Enda Abune Aregawi* was renovated with all of the existing iconographs substituted in the second half of the 1990s . The church has been chosen as a site as it can serve as a typical representation of modern churches in Eritrean urban centers that are affected by the shifts in visual culture of the Tewahdo identity as iconographs in the church have been constantly replaced by newer paintings and duplicates donated by the faithful as acts of piety. Unlike *Enda Mikiel* and *Enda Mariam* churches, the iconographs in this church do not show a consistent style and character. The murals and framed chromolithographs at *Enda Abune Aregawi* church that are produced by different painters have diverse styles and patterns ranging from *Tewahdo* style to Caucasian reproductions.

For instance, a duplicate painting of the battle of St. Michael and Satan is depicted by representing Satan with Black African body form. Clearly, Satan who has been depicted as a strong Caucasian male in the original Guido Reni painting is modified as a black skinned male under the heels of a red haired Caucasian male in the duplicated painting(Figure 4.15(a)). This is similar to the depiction of Satan as a black male in other painted reproductions of Saint Michael's paintings. In a duplicate poster at *Enda Mikiel* church, for example, the distinction between the blond, Caucasian St. Michael and the black male Satan is more explicit (Figure 4.15 (b)). The body signifiers of black skin and afro hair used in the representation of Satan resemble those of a typical black male.

Moreover, a chain that St. Michael holds in his left hand to tie Satan in the original Baroque painting is replaced by golden scales that conventionally represent the concept of justice. Worldwide, this symbolic use of a sword and scales is founded upon the tradition of the Roman icon of Lady *Justitia*, who holds a sword on right hand and scales on the right embodying notions of justice and fairness (Smith, 2011). The inclusion of a scale in such a reproduction where power relations between the white/ Caucasian and the black are marked as connoted meanings is significant as the 'White' male is portrayed as the upholder of justice and the 'Black' male as the disruptive being than needs to be under control.

The replica paintings of St. Michael and Satan's battle based on the original Italian painting show both adaptation and alteration strategies of meaning representation and denotation. The choices made in encoding by the painters are evidenced by the use of the particular signifiers in the connotation and denotation of notions of good and evil. The replica painting of St. Michael at *Enda Abune Aregawi* church for instance, copies the use of dove-like wings and upright posture in signifying the angel. However, the chains of the Caucasian angel tying Satan are replaced by the scales of *Justitia*. Similarly, the fallen horizontal posture of Satan and the bat-like wings from the original are replicated in the copied painting. The alteration from the original is noted in the way the skin of Satan is made substantially darker and made to assume the looks of a black male.

A similar replica of St. Michael's image that was being painted in artist Frezghi's studio also retained all of the characteristic signifiers of the Caucasian male angel including the wings and the posture of the original. However, Frezghi used as a model an altered replica that had the Roman scales of justice instead of the chains.

The use of key lighting in connoting the protagonist and use of shadows and contrast in connoting antagonist in the Italian paintings is a convention that has not been integrated in either the hybrid or the replicated Caucasian iconographs in the

Eritrean churches. All chromolithographs continue to be depicted in bright uniform lighting.

Figure 4.15(a). Half Serpent half Black male depiction of Satan under the heels of St. Michael At *Enda Abune Aregawi church*

Figure 4.15 (b) White St. Michael as upholder of justice, striking a Black Satan. Chromolitograph. A donated chromolithograph at *Enda Mikiel, Adi Raesi*

Such chromolithographs and copied iconographs are usually gifted to the churches by the faithful, whose names are often included in the paintings. As can be noted at the left bottom of the painting in Figure 4.15.(a), instead of the name of the artist, the name of the commissioner of the painting is written in *Geez* as "ዘውሃበ፡ ኤልሳ ምለሊክ" (donated by Elsa Mlelik). According to artist Berhane (2014, oral interview) such names also commonly include those of deceased family members. He says the most important concern for the donors is to have their names or names of their deceased family members to be displayed in the churches, rather than the style or details of the offered paintings. This practice of including donor's names was quite common in the 18th century Tewahdo church to the extent that the donors were also painted in the iconographs along with the holy figures. In such iconographs commonly commissioned by the nobility, "donors [were] more and more represented, whether lying down or standing up, arms crossed over their chest in a posture denoting humility and prayer" (Tiesse, 2010).

Up on making orders, Berhane says that the order that the clients make does not go beyond naming the saint want to commission a painting. Then follows making of a replica painting of existing iconographs with the names of the donors included."It is a sensitive area where artists never experiment but make exact copies," adds Berhane, stating that artists do not inscribe their own expressive depictions based on their own taste. Within the duplication however, the artists vary in the manners they replicate, as they "add a few things here and there, like the physical looks but never the overall depiction of the scene" he states.

Tewahdo churches have always followed a culture where iconographs were reproduced across generations based on 'faithful copying' of existing icons (Bascom, 2013). This tradition has earlier been noted by Chojnacki that traditionally, Tewahdo iconographers had functioned as decorators who were engaged in copying and "obviously took care to recopy the text and to reproduce the essentials of pictorial illustration" (Chojnacki, 1964).

In all the four churches visited in this study, the depiction of holy personages was always based on copying of either existing Tewahdo iconographs or Caucasian chromolithographs. The reliance on earlier models for reproduction is crucial in understanding the dynamics of the shifts in the iconographic styles. In contrast to earlier Tewahdo style reproductions that were mainly done based on references from older models in other churches or manuscripts, the new iconographs are made based on mechanically reproduced models in the form of prints, photocopies and downloaded digital copies of Western European religious art.

This particular habit of using models in the production of iconography has made the Italian influence more traceable due to the fact that not all the saints and figures in the Tewahdo church have their equivalents in Italian Catholic church. Only the Holy figures that are common to both the Tewahdo church and Roman Catholic Church have been subject of shifts in the depiction of their identity. Besides St. Mary and Jesus, common holy figures in both cultures include St. Michael and St. Gabriel. As mentioned in the discussions of iconographs in St. Michael Church and St. *Georgis* Church, representations of these common holy figures have dominantly been reproduced with Caucasian identity based on body signifiers and settings copied from Italian Catholic paintings.

On the other hand, the observation shows local icons of saints that are known only in the Tewahdo churches of Eritrea and Ethiopia have not had substantial shifts of identity depiction, as no Italian or Western models for depicting of these saints exist. These are mostly the Byzantine saints that brought Christianity to the region and other local saints with mythical legends in local folklore. These include *Abune Aregawi, Abune Tekle, Abune Gabre MenfesKidus,* …etc; and their depiction is based on single scenes that highlight their legend.

As the physical attributes of all the personages in Tewahdo iconographs are basically indistinct from each other, they are only identifiable by such additional elements as the python in the case of *Abune Aregawi*; or a severed leg in the case of *Abune Tekle* (a saint who prayed standing seven years that one of his legs dropped

off); or lions and tigers in the depiction of *Abune Gebre Menfes Kidus* (a saint who is believed to have lived in the wild fasting accompanied by wild beasts is depicted dressed in animal skin) (Figure 4.17).

Figure 4.16. iconographs of Abune Aregawi. At *Abune Aregawi* Church, Asmara

No Italian or European chromolithographs exist of Abune Aregawi, as the saint is only regionally known in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Visual representation of the saint has always been based on a local narrative that constituted a priest ascending a mountain carried by a python (Figure 4. 16). The iconographs that have been reproduced from earlier models all feature a light-brown skinned priest. In all three iconographs of Abune Aregawi in Figure 4.16, the saint's garment and the white cap are locally familiar clothing items.

Figure 4.17: Tewahdo iconographs of Abune Gebre Menfes Kidus and Abune Tekle Haimanot at *Enda Mikiel* church, Adi Raesi.

What is copied from earlier models in the depiction of local saints is the careful incorporation of the key elements of the story and not the exact replication of dress codes and composition as is done in the reproductions of the Italian paintings.

The addition of racial body signifiers by the copying artists has also been noted at *Enda Abune Aregawi* church. In a painting of the garden of Eden, where Eve is portrayed giving Adam the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve are depicted as Caucasian male and female, and Satan is depicted as half man half Serpent figure. This depiction essentially presents Satan as a half black male half serpent creature.

This depiction of the half black-male figure is copied from an original Caucasian style painting whose original painter is unknown (Figure 4.18 (b)). Eve is depicted holding the fruit that Satan gives her on her right hand while giving another to Adam with her left hand. The only major difference the reproduced painting in *Enda Abune Aregawi* displays in terms of body signifiers is the change of Eve's hair color from blonde to black although that doesn't change her overall Caucasian

identity and the contrast with the Black skinned Satan. In the painted reproduction, the serpent's half Black male look is accentuated by the use of Afro Hair and dark brown skin tone.

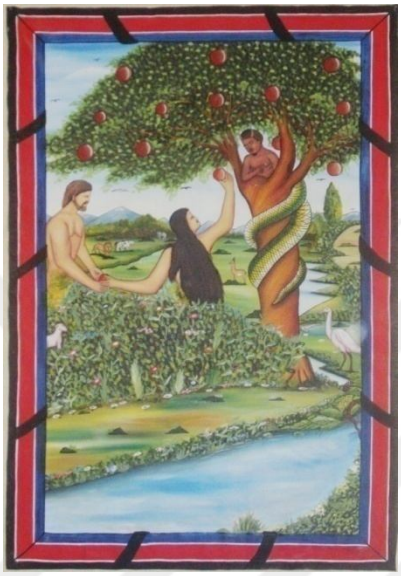
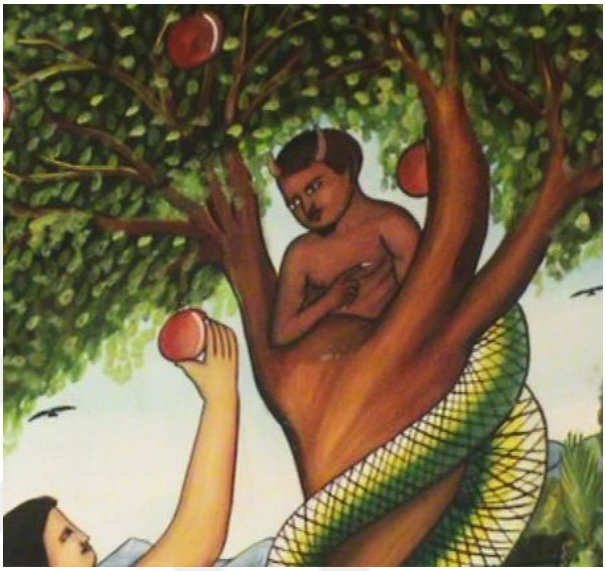


Figure 4.18 (a). Copied painting of Adam and Eve at *Enda Abune Aregawi* Church



(Enlarged) Note the depiction of the Serpent as a black male.

Figure 4.18 (b). The original painting that was used as a model for the painting at Enda Abune Aregawi.

(Enlarged) Note the dark green skin color of the serpent

The appropriation of such visual motifs laden with negative connotations of blackness puts its black viewers in a context that makes them dislike their own skin color and dissociate themselves from their own bodies. Frantz Fanon contends that a racist culture alienates the black man from himself through "harmful cultural constructs" that passes the colonial consciousness that equates blackness with evil and sin (Newheart, 2004). Fanon argues that the 'Negro Myth' has a political function of a scapegoat repository where whites "attempt to externalize, to project out those qualities of one's self that one finds reprehensible, to ascribe[their] origins to someone else" (Fanon, 1986); and further goes " the black man then functions as an embodiment of "bad instincts, of the darkness in every ego, of the uncivilized savage, the Negro who slumbers in every white man" .

The reproduction of the iconograph of Adam and Eve and the Devil at the Garden of Eden duplicates the racial signifiers employed in the original imported painting. The existence of such a racially explicit image in the worship sphere also shows the condoning by the clergy of such type of representation of ethnic distinction between the forces of good and evil. This case is an example of the situation Fanon stated where the Whites ascribe the qualities of evil to the black, and the Blacks end up disliking their own skin color and aspiring the white skin. He insists that "it is the racist who creates the inferiorized" (Fanon, 1952) and outlines how images of evil, fear, and ugliness lead the black man to negate his own negation (Kobayashi and Boyle, 2014). The efforts of iconographers in duplicating these depictions that degrade the black skin is a form of hegemonic appropriation of the negative stereotype of that condones their subjugation and repression. These appropriations are "cultural trappings" that lead the black subjects to think of themselves as white and thus "come to conduct themselves subjectively and intellectually, as white" (Hook, 2007). This willful appropriation of such 'harmful cultural constructs' in the worship spheres of the *Tewahdo* is nothing less than the irrational neurotic condition inflicted by Colonialism in Fanon's terms.

Figure 4.19 a. Tewahdo style mural at Enda Abune Aregawi, depicting St. Mary and child, along with the angels Michael and Gabriel. (Photo by Author).

Figure 4.19 b. Roman Chromolitograph of St. Mary at Enda Abune Aregawi Church, Asmara. (Photo by Author).

5. CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to look at the influences of Italian religious imagery in creating meanings with racial connotations in the iconographs of Tewahdo church that use Caucasian iconographs as models for duplication. The key focus of the analysis has been directed in examining how the locally produced iconographs have come to serve in the construction of discourses regarding the supremacy of the Italian/Caucasian race. The way power struggles are fought at the level of signification is what constitutes ideology. Signification reflects contesting power structures, where each group in the struggle would strive to impart its ideology in the text discourse; and hegemonic domination should be understood as "a whole range of practical strategies by which a dominant power elicits consent to its rule from those it subjugates" (Eagelton, 1991). As such, the signification of meaning and the reiteration of power relations in Tewahdo iconographs fall nothing short of an ideological manifestation, nor should the relevance of Caucasian iconographic adoption and mimicry should be understated as means of consent building among the colonized.

The particular signifiers of racial identity have been analysed to examine the representation of the characters the icons are made to resemble. With Peirce's frame work, within iconic signs, the signifier represents the signified by having a likeness to it (Rose, 2006). In this viewpoint, icons are made to resemble the object they represent. Regardless of the intentions of the iconographer, the characters in the icons are assumed by their viewers to be transparent representations of the figures they represent. In this aspect, the depiction of sinners or Satan as a black person for example, is read by the viewers as a representation of reality because in icons likeness is assumed. Within Stuart Hall's framework, such a representation is considered as an ideological code in which the decoder fully shares the text's code and accepts and reproduces the preferred reading (a reading which may not have been the result of any conscious intention on the part of the author(s)) - in such a stance the textual code seems 'natural' and 'transparent' (Chadler, 2004). The

depiction of racially connotative meanings in iconographs should thus be considered as an ideological effort, that yields a reading by the viewers independent of the conscious intentions of the iconographers.

This study has not attempted to investigate the intentions of the iconographers or the attitudes of the viewers on the other. The research scope has been centered on significations that render racial connotations in context of the colonial and postcolonial context of Eritrea. As Sturcken and Catwright (2001) state, finding out intentions of producers does not reveal much about an image since such intentions may not match up with what viewers actually take away from the image:

> "People often see an image differently from how it is intended to be seen, either because they bring experiences and associations to a particular image that were not anticipated by its producer, or because the meanings they derive are informed by the context(or setting) in which an image is seen" (Sturcken & Catwright, 2001).

Rather the focus of this study has been put on the way signifiers and the signified interact in the construction of a myth that legitimizes the power order of colonial hierarchy and apartheid. Such myth has been based upon depoliticizing the colonial supremacy of the white through the promotion of imagery that tends to naturalize the colonial and racial hegemony.

Generally, representations of race in Christian visual culture have been marked by ideological contests of race and not based on verifiable accounts as discussed by Colin Kidd (2005). The face of the religion has been depicted in different racial representations, although the Caucasian representation has come to stand out as the dominant face of the religion. Tewahdo Christianity, that had its own black iconography before the introduction of Italian Caucasian iconography, has come to adopt White representation in its liturgical culture by using imported images and by whitening its figures. This research tries to answer how Tewahdo iconography has come to adopt a signification system that reflects racial hierarchies and attempts to naturalize the subordination of the black colonized society. It has been attempted to

investigate the function of iconographs in promoting moral and social superiority of the Italian race by focusing on the use of racial body signifiers.

Following a classical Marxist approach, the shift in the visual culture of the Tewahdo Church can be viewed as an outcome of the hegemony of the colonial Italian class on the subordinated colonized mass based on the dissemination of a consciousness that puts the white race as the superior and rightful holders of power. Here it should be stressed as Foucault (1980) urges, by the 'state', it is not meant of a single unified object of interests, but a "pluricentered and multidimensional formation" in Stuart Hall's terms (Hall, 1985). The state in the context of the Eritrean colony, thus should not be conceived only as the Italian governing authority, but a formation that practiced power in different forms and was active in different sites:

> " The function of the state is, in part, precisely to bring together or articulate into a complexly structured instance, a range of political discourses and social practices which are concerned at different sites with the transmission and transformation of power-some of those practices having little to do with the political domain as such, being concerned with other domains which are nonetheless articulated to the state, for example, familial life, civil society, gender and economic relations" (Hall, 1985).

Although the Catholic church might not have been granted privileged status within colonial religious policies (Chelati, 2007), as the authorities understood the centrality of the local religion as the element of social and political cohesion. It nonetheless had further superiority of means of production as it had printing and duplicating technologies as early as 1863 (Nyamnjoh & Englund, 2004) that enabled it to assume a hegemony of visual culture. The church had assumed the role of providing education to the natives, and as the ideologies of the Catholic church were mostly in line with those of the colonialists, the presence of the Catholic Capuchin fathers was strongly supported by the Italian government and members of the Italian Catholic intelligentsia (Berge and Taddia, 2013).

The Catholic church which then became an official state religion mass distributed copies of scriptures and imagery in the Eritrean colony as part of its missionary activities. Caucasian iconographs, particularly Marian icons had been revered by the natives as objects of cult with healing powers since the 16th century when they were brought by Jesuit missionaries (Cohen, 2009). This long rooted valorization of Caucasian iconographs as prayer materials in addition to existing valorization of lighter skin within the Tigrinya society could have most likely elicited favorable attitudes towards the embrace of the inflow of the latter chromolithographs.

As objects of cultural production, iconographs carry surface and second level meanings or connotations that render abstract ideologies to their viewers. In the spirit of Althusser's skepticism of assuming singularity of ideology or class reductionism, the complexity of pre-colonial racial and cultural dispositions of the natives and their relationships with their colonizers makes it uneasy to perceive the existence a single class ideology. The project of *Italianata* (Italianization of natives), for example, should be conceived as promoting its ideology in contest with other ideologies. At the same time, the discussion should not be understood in terms of class reductionism – that the ideology of colonized class always corresponded to its positions in social relations of production. There were contesting attitudes in face of Italian political, economic, and cultural domination which unveiled varying reactions within the colonized Tigrinya (Connel, 1993; Yohannes, 2010) . There was resistance and hostility towards the Italian cultural domination by some; compromise of views by others in the form of partial embracing; and full embrace of Italianization (*Italianata)* by others who adopted the cultural values and attitudes ascribed by the civilizing project.

The disarray of reactions by the colonized Eritreans came about due to multiple reasons including the power incongruence that existed prior to the Italian colonization, as noted by Alexander Nati who stated that "different groups had unequal power relations among themselves prior to colonials" (Dirar, 2007). Such attitudes especially by the Tewahdo majority Tigrinya, held as a principle of their

faith valued their Middle Eastern (Semitic) descent, have had long standing sense of pride and superiority over other non-Semitic Eritreans and Africans. Class hierarchies within the Tigrinya and with other Eritrean groups were reflected in the puritan racial views that often led to the devaluation of skin and hair types of the non- Semitic races that have been considered inferior (Pankhurst, 1997; Campbell, 2007). The Italian colonial administrators and scholars especially in the days of Fascism (1930's) capitalized on these "ethnic imbalances" in Eritrea to justify both colonial rule and the introduction of tougher racial regulations:

> " For example, Martino Mario Moreno, General Director of the Office for Political Affairs in the (Ministry for Italian Africa), asserted that Eritreans possessed a 'deep sense' of racial differentiation and that they 'instinctively acknowledge' the superiority of the white man" (Dirar 2007: 264-65).

Religious imagery has often been used in the reinforcement of the promoted superiority of the White race. As colonizers created the identity of the colonized "other' as Edward Said (2000) contends; this creation of the image of the dark and uncivilized 'other' also essentially functioned in constructing the elevated status of the White colonizers. Oriental discourse created not only the Orient but the Occident as well, just as how colonization created the identities of both the colonized and the colonizers. Similarly the colonial discourse functions in the manufacturing of colonialists, just as it manufactures the colonized (Memmi 1965).

Colonial conquest and rule was justified by projecting fears and desires of Europeans by the explorers, scientists and missionaries whom Said calls "Orientalists". As Fanon (1986) has maintained, these projections of negative character on the colonized were also ways of externalizing "reprehensible" self qualities that were attempted "to ascribe their origins to someone else. The construction of the black man's image as the uncivilized, unruly and sinister being essentially served in building that image of the White self as the civilized, just and holy. These discourses were in turn used to create the identity of the colonizers as

they were projected into ideological apparatus of religion, education and cultural products.

The result of the appropriation of the cultural dominant white iconographs by iconographers and clergy in the Tewahdo church resulted in the building of racially connotative meanings that favored subordination and colonization. Apparently, white skin has been consistently used in iconographs copied from Caucasian chromolithographs as an embodiment of good, holiness and justice. Black skin on the contrary has commonly been used to signify characters of evil, sin and injustice. Such distinctions are mainly witnessed in latter iconographs that were duplicated from Caucasian iconographs. Early Tewahdo iconography did not make distinctions of skin color in the representation of evil or good. Iconographs of monastic saints that are not known in the Italian Catholic dominion have not been affected by the identity shifts as there are no Italian models to copy from. These group of iconographs may also be seen as sort of a control group, to show what would have happened if there were no Italian models to copy from at all. Despite a degree of whitening, this group of iconographs has mostly kept the racial identity of the saints, their clothing and environment locally recognizable.

The domination of Italian iconographs came about with the booming of technologies of imagery and mechanical reproduction in Europe at the outset of the 20th century. The influx of posters, leaflets and decorated frames from Italy and the appeal of the work of Italian artists in the new Catholic churches built for Italian settlers and converts reinforced this cultural hegemony. The valorization of White skin which was not necessarily created then was nonetheless reinforced by this cultural influx. Even today, long after the end of colonization, chromolithograph prints of models originating in Western Europe and America dominate the imagination of the face of God and holiness.

On a contrary account, racial signifiers in Catholic iconographs have been reported to have been appropriated by native colonized South Africans using religious art as a means of resistance. Black South African artists represented Marian

images and scenes like Crucifixion and birth of Christ by depicting the characters as black skinned as a means of protest in against the oppressive nature of the dominant social, religious and political circumstances of the respective histories of colonization and apartheid (Arthur, 2007).

The case especially with contemporary Eritrean artists is quite different from that of the South African artists. This could be related with the Tewahdo tradition of detailed duplication from existing copies that prevents the artists from transposing images directly from the Holy Scripture (Chojnacki, 1973) or from using their own imagination. This prevents the artists from expressing their own impressions and attitudes. Yet, some alterations and addition of signifiers laden with racial connotations by the iconographers show their indifference and at times embrace of White supremacy. The use of the racial body as a signifier in such images has been explicit, as evil and sin have been represented with the black skin color in contrast with the embodiment of goodness and holiness in the Caucasian body type.

In America, racial representation in Christian iconography has also been an issue of an ideological contest for appropriation as white supremacists tried to embody a divinity of their own race to justify discrimination and suppression of the non-White population. These were related to beliefs about Christ's skin tone, eye color, and beard and his connection to racial troubles of the day (Blum et. al, 2009). The representation of the holy in Christianity has been a symbolic ground of contest between different movements and ideologies including White supremacist and civil rights movements. Blum mentions that Warner Sallman's iconograph , *Head of Christ* (1941) emerged as the most consensual representation of the body of Christ, and soon became the most widely reproduced piece of artwork in world history (Blum, 2012). Brianna Simmons noted that this particular iconograph of Warner Sallman is the most popular chromolithograph representing Jesus Christ (Simmons, 2009). The particular image is also a highly common Christian representation in the Eritrean Orthodox spheres as the most common representation of Jesus Christ.

As stated by Heldmann (2015), one reason for the success of mass distribution of Italian devotional images was their approval in the Tewahdo community that regarded Roman Caucasian representations as more beautiful and more holy. Typically, in the Tewahdo culture, Marian beauty is considered a divine perfection. The changes in the racial representation of St. Mary as she was transformed from a brown skinned Semitic-African woman into a Caucasian one would apparently trigger unconscious endorsement of the Caucasian racial supremacy. Here echo the views of Louis Althusser (2006) who stated that ideology exists as an interpellation that sublimates in the actions and behavior of subjects rather than in the form of conscious ideas and representations. Needless to say, this whitening of divine beauty functions in justifying the moral premiership of the White race over the native black race.

Through the comparative observation carried in the sites, this research has led to the comprehension that iconographic depiction in the Tewahdo church of Eritrea has not only been influenced by Italian Christian visual art, but that the iconographic media are themselves discourses reinforcing the existing colonial power hierarchy. The fact regarding the iconographers' preference to depict the negation of their own skin colors, by reproducing and even accentuating Caucasian iconographs attests the vigor of this discourse. Stuart Hall reasons that such willful reproduction of dominant ideologies arises as a result of an ideology that the coders do not consciously commit themselves to, but, which instead, it "writes them" (Hall, 1985). In the Foucauldian sense, Tewahdo iconography has surfaced as a manifestation of power that creates knowledge about social hierarchies between the colonizer and the colonized on one hand, and between the different colonized ethnicities on the other.

This study has noted the continued presence of particular images like that of St. Michael battling Satan in many churches; and has observed that the iconographs are all based on a 14th century Baroque Italian painting where the encoders of the replica iconographs copied the details of St. Michael's outfits and armor that were represented as those of a Roman knight.

This dominant method of faithful (detailed) copying has also been noted in the depiction of St. George slaying a dragon. This particular iconograph had previously been coded in Tewahdo iconography by depicting superficial looks and costumes of a national warrior and a maiden, with a setting of a locally familiar environment (Figure 4.13.b). In the new iconographs, like the one in St. George church however, the saint is depicted as yet another Roman knight, with details of his outfits and armor insinuating a European identity. This is augmented by the depiction of the maiden that had been previously depicted as a young Semitic-African woman in Tewahdo iconographs but substituted in the Caucasian iconographs by a Caucasian maiden in front of a Roman country house (Figure 4.13.a).

The depiction of Caucasian male figures as agents of good and justice has been repeatedly observed in the iconographs resonating Stuart Hall's notion (1980) of invoking the dominant meaning by appearing normal and obvious. The holy figures that used to be depicted as local Habesha, have been depicted in such iconographs as Caucasian Roman figures. The representation of St. George's and St. Michael's narratives as Roman knights fighting holy battles work to this effect.

The scale of *Justitia*, that has been incorporated in place of a chain that tied Satan in the original Guido Reni painting (Figure 4.6. (a)), is an ideological signifier that renders a myth that depoliticizes and dehistorizes the connoted subjugation and control of the black colonized nation (Figure 4.15 (a) & 15(b)). The ideological meaning of the image is rendered in the form of what Barthes terms as "second-order meaning" which he defines as " that which is a sign (namely the associative totality of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" (Barthes, 1984). The historically produced and conditioned meanings of condoning the colonial order in the image are signified by the Caucasian angel striking the black devil and the justification for the black's subordination is embodied by the scales. The image of Saint Michael appears to be objective and innocent of any historicity, as in any visual myth.. The image does not deny racial distinctions and the order of power, as they have been clearly reiterated. What it does is it distorts the reality of colonial subjugation and denies its naturalization of the

subjugation and inferiority of the Black race. As Barthes contends, it is the function of myth to depoliticize and dehistoricize meanings that are always historical and political.

> " Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact" (Barthes, 1984).

Black skin color has been commonly used to represent evil and sin in contemporary iconographs that are replicated from Caucasian chromolithographs. This trend has been manifested in two forms: exact replication as in the example of depiction of Satan as a black skinned male in Gardern of Eve, copied from a Caucasian model (Figure 4.18 (a) & 18 (b)); and alteration by the iconographers changing the skin color of Satan from white to black as in the depiction of Satan in the battle with Saint Michael (Figure 4.15 (a) & 15 (b)). It is also worthy of note that iconographers who had copied the Caucasian skinned Satan, chose to add additional elements like claws and horns, as it appears it was not fitting to depict the ordinary male Caucasian's body to represent Satan (Figure 4.6), showing their reluctance to depict Satan as an ordinary Caucasian male, although similar reluctance was not visible in the depiction of Satan with black body type.

In both cases, there has been a willful adoption of the dominant representations, and beyond that, the local iconographers moved on to add alterations that would reinforce the dominant ideology of white superiority and black inferiority. In Stuart Hall's (1982) terms, this process is representation as opposed to reflection, in the regard that it involves active selection, structuring and reshaping. Beyond replicating an existing meaning, the encoders are engaged in reinforcing the dominant meaning, unconsciously promoting a notion of divine Italian supremacy.

The study has also identified that indigenous Tewahdo visual culture does not depict Satan in the human form using racial signifiers. Satan has been commonly

depicted as a bestial figure with minimum affinities to any race. This had also been the case in the history of European Christian art until the 6th century there were only serpents and dragons that were depicted as spiritual enemies of mankind. The depiction of Satan in more recognizable human form came about in the middle ages when the devil and his dominions were depicted with sharp teeth, claws and often with wings. Tewahdo churches use the medieval approach of depicting the devil as a bestial character unrecognizable in the human form. The demonic look of the monster in hell was rendered by depicting him as a giant creature chewing with horns chewing sinners (Figure 4.4(b) and Figure 4.4(b)). As stated in the previous chapter, the use of the skin color blue could also be a motif borrowed from European religious art, where blue was considered as the least divine color – the color of the closest heaven human beings could see (Feree, 1993).

Despite exposure to medieval Italian religious art, Tewahdo iconography did not incorporate the human form of the devil that was introduced during the Baroque period despite its exposure to Italian religious art as early as the 14th century. Heldmann (1994) has pointed the adoption of many elements of Italian Baroque art by Tewahdo iconographers in the 14th and 15th centuries. That era was the time when the devil took on a far more human and even sensual persona (Mcafertty, 2014). Yet indigenous Tewahdo iconography has until recently remained with the middle age tradition of bestial depiction of devil. Similarly the depiction of sinners has not attributed any racial myths as both the good and sinners have been depicted in similar racial body features of hair type, eyes, lips etc.

Another prominent non-racial body signifier that has been in use in Tewahdo iconography is facial profiling. By depicting the faces of evil characters sideways and those of good and holy characters frontally, this pattern guides the viewer to identify the nature of character of the personages depicted in the iconographs. In addition to these, the use of anchorage text that briefs the meaning of the images has also been noted as a prominent non-racial signifier in indigenous Tewahdo iconographs. Barthes writes that the use of anchorage is one of the various techniques “intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to

counter the terror of uncertain signs; the linguistic message is one of these" (Barthes, 1977).

This research has also come upon identifying hybridization of racial representation as one result of the Caucasian art hegemony. Local religious imagery that has been produced especially in the last century has been characterized by hybridization of style and Creolization of skin of the personages depicted. Enda Mariam church and EndaAbuneAregawi church as sites revealed much of this effect, where the identity of the personages and the settings in the painting have been made to take Creolized looks with combined elements of Tewahdo and Caucasian representation. The creolization and lightening of holy figures is also related to existing attitudes that esteems lighter skin as an attribute of Semitic decent as opposed to the Hamitic descent, a race believed to have been cursed to slavery by Noah according to Solomon (2011) who cites the *Kibra Negest* (Ethiopian national epic) and the Old Testament (Genesis 21-13) . The dark skin of the Hams (kushites) is associated with a curse of slavery, and Tigrinya families who mix with such families called Barya (slaves) are also considered impure.

> "The Barya are considered black regardless of their actual color, while non-Barya perceive themselves as red, in a dichotomy fortified by a system of mythological stories that was conceived to perpetuate the Barya's 'otherness'" (Solomon, 2011).

This projection of undesired attributes to "others" was what Edward Said (200) had described as the primary means of constructing the image self by the White Europeans in Orientalism. The colonizer, by creating the 'other' which was to be colonized, created his own identity in opposition to that of the colonized (Said, 2000). In a similar fashion the colonized Tigrinya, who had pre-colonial hegemony over the 'dark skinned' non-Semitic groups have for long sought to create their own images in contrast to the 'slave' (Barya) attributes they associate with these groups.

> "…there are frequent occasions when the black subject thinks of him- or herself as white, that, after adopting the cultural trappings and language of white

> culture, they come to conduct themselves, subjectively and intellectually, as white. As odd as this may sound, one should bear in mind the fundamental irrationality of the neurotic condition that Fanon is describing" (Hook, 2004).

The whitening of skin in the iconographs can be analyzed as a phenomenon of mimicry of Italian colonizers ; as being more Italian was a way of ascending the social ladders and economical privileges. Mimicry is a phenomenon that arises when members of the colonial or post colonial society imitate their colonizers in the hope of accessing privileges unintentionally suppressing their own cultural identity. Homi Bhahba who views that mimcry "emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" writes that it comes to being as a result of a "desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 2012). Underlining the fact that the colonizers don't want the colonized to be exactly like them, but to aspire to be almost like them , Bhabha notes mimicry entails ambiguity as it repeats rather than represents, keeping certain differences intact. He outlines his concept using Lacan's notion that:

> " The effect of mimicry is camouflage…. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare " (Bhabha, 2012).

Subtle fetishes of becoming "like" the white were cultivated with the introduction of Italian commodities like soap, white fabric, white grain and white sugar in the early days of the colonial era (Zere, 2015). As Zere notes, these white commodities and whitening agents were initially viewed with skepticism by the Tewahdo clergy, as they were seen as agents of colonial seduction. These commodities attained a new meaning as they were associated not only with being white but also with cleanliness in all its forms. Especially in the urban settings where there was early access to soap and whitening detergents, white clothing has been constructed as a sign of purity, joy and the glamour. Men and women wear white in spiritual spaces and contexts, as well as in joyous events such as weddings and

holidays. Parallel to that, whitened skin has been considered reflective of racial purity and a sign of well being. Whitening of skin especially among women had been issue of concern especially due to the use of harmful chemicals. Lately, the Eritrean Ministry of health has embarked awareness campaigns of skin related diseases associated with bleaching. This has resulted in the reduction of the use of chemicals, although women continue to use non-chemical skin lightening remedies. The influence of Western, Indian and Middle Eastern media has been significant in inculcating the skin whitening fetish. None the less, the influence of religious images has been sustained as a key influence. Lest exaggeration, the Marian iconograph is one of the most widely reproduced and circulated Caucasian images in Eritrea . Not only is the Caucasian Marian representation adored and worshiped, but it is also considered as the highest standard of beauty in the culture. Qeshi (priest) Mehari Mussie indicated that in the interview by stating iconographs in the Tewahdo church are expected to capture the Marian beauty , and that Caucasian iconographs successfully do so because of "their instruments (mechanical reproduction), they (European iconographers) have been able to produce beautiful images" (Mehari, oral interview, 2014).

The effect of mass distributed Roman chromolithographs in Eritrea has materialized in two manners. First is their increasing acquisition of space and visibility in spheres of worship and personal milieu (in homes, offices, cars). The second and more significant impact is the employment of these Roman chromolithographs as models for multiple replica paintings. Besides Marian images (brought from Santa Maria Maggiore in the 16th century by the Jesuits), later Caucasian images that have been replicated with such a magnitude include the painting of St. Michael in Battle with Satan (by Guido Reni) and St. George slaying a dragon.

This research has identified a pattern that the iconographs that have been transformed by Roman iconographic representation are mainly those images that represent saints or holy figures common to both the Tewahdo church and the Roman Catholic church. This explains why iconographs of saints that are exclusive to the

Tewahdo church haven't experienced much of a racial make over as a result of the Caucasian imagery's dominance. Effectively, depictions of local monastic saints like Abune Aregawi, Abune Tekle Haimanot, Abune Gebre Menfes Kidus have maintained their indigenous identity, as they have been centered on local narratives that still remain un-substituted due to the apparent reason that there are no Caucasian models to copy from.

In addition to providing an overview of traditional and contemporary iconography in the Eritrean Tewahdo church, the most important aspect of this research is its focus on the representation of racial distinctions in light of colonial and intra-national dominions. Tewahdo iconography has been analyzed as a discourse of construction of hegemonic social power order in the colonized society.

Christian imagery has always been a subject of contesting appropriations and representations, although the Caucasian representation has ultimately sustained hegemony over other contesting depictions as indicated by Kidd (2006). This racial contest has been particularly worthy of note in the Eritrean case study, because unlike most other colonized contexts, Christianity was not considered as the "White Man's religion" by the natives. Tewahdo Christianity, was well in place at the time of colonial arrival with its own scriptures written in the liturgical language (Geez) , its own iconography and liturgical traditions. The European missionaries, mainly the Italians and others including the Portuguese, the French Lazarists, and the Swedish did not introduce a new religion, but a new denomination of the same religion. The imagery brought along by the Catholic missionaries, was gradually integrated in the litury of the Tewahdo churches and influenced the racial representation and imagination in the faith. Catholic proselytism (conversions) which did not meet much success due to the rootedness of Tewahdo orthodoxy (Miran, 2007) nonetheless has made its imprint by projecting a glorified image of the White race. It has been agued in this research that the effect of imagery mainly brought from Italy has played a substantial role in developing a favorable attitude towards the "White" as the morally justified power holder.

This research adds to the literature written so far on the history and development of Tewahdo iconographs including studies by Chojnacki (1964, 1973, 1983), Heldmann (1994, 2005), Pankhrust (1997, 2007), Simmons (2009), and Silvermann (2009). These studies provide backing to the main arguments of this research as they establish the existence of early Italian influences such as the Quatrocento (14th century) Italian Baroque paintings and 16th century Roman Jesuit Marian iconographs. The findings in this research step ahead to the onset of Italian colonization and discuss how the early influences were continued and further strengthened with the cultural hegemony of the Italians, as the iconographs were unobtrusively transformed by ritual practices into ideological apparatus.

Moreover, this research has identified a previously uncovered aspect of Tewahdo iconography, regarding colorism or the distinctions of blackness, and has analyzed it as a reflection of rooted pre-colonial genealogical claims of purity.

This thesis did not attempt to institute a view that Italian iconographers or the Italian colonial state deliberately used iconographs to assert consent of the colonized locals. Rather, the argument made in this research maintains that regardless of the intentions of both the original Italian iconographers and the copyist Eritrean iconographers, the replicated iconographs are laden with connotative meanings that depoliticize and de-historicize the colonial experience of subjugation and apartheid. Clearly these images, on their own accord promote the colonial supremacy of the white race even today, long after the end of colonization. The continued embrace of racialization of power is a colonial legacy that Fanon (2007,2008) refers as “a wound” to the psyche of the colonized that has been internalized as a post traumatic effect underscoring their inferiority and inadequacy.

To provide further understanding regarding such attitudes of racial depiction, a reception analysis of the viewers of the iconographs is a recommended area for future research. Silvermann (2009) who did a study of mechanical reproduction of iconographs in Ethiopia found out that not much significance is given by the viewers of the iconographs whether they are original paintings or mechanical reproductions.

As stated by Qeshi Mehari of the office of the Eritrean Orthodox church, a similar indifference to the racial depiction exists among the clergy, as long as “divine” looks are made (oral interview, 2014). This research has established that whiteness has been used in all its form to represent holiness and divinity. The valorization of white skin and association of whiteness by the black Eritrean viewers is also an area that can yield significant contributions to the postcolonial literature. This includes reception analysis of black self images in Eritrea with regard to the different racial hierarchies and attitudes of purity and distinctions prevalent especially in the Eritrean highlands.

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