

Full Length Research Paper

A study of the impact of orthodox Christians' fasting on demand for biscuits in Ethiopia

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This paper attempts to assess the impact of Orthodox Christians' fasting on the demand for biscuits in Ethiopia, reviewing the fact that 'culture', particularly religion, plays a crucial role in determining consumption patterns in developing countries. The first stage of research involved a review of literature which was conducted using desk research. The second stage include analysis of primary data secured through a survey of 81 consumers, 40 retailers, interviews with 15 religious leaders, and a jury of executive opinion technique with 6 marketing executives to assess the impact of Orthodox Christians' fasting on demand for biscuits. The impact of Orthodox Christians' fasting is quite pervasive in shaping consumption habits of church members in Ethiopia. Religious-culture here places a total taboo on the use of animal products during fasting. The demand for biscuits-for-fasts which do not use animal products such as milk and butter offers good opportunity to marketers. It was found that market demand for biscuits to be used during fasts, based on a meager per-capita consumption of 400 g per person per year, totals 8200 tons per year. This bestows a good opportunity for marketers. This study reveals that the market, though attractive, is still under-served. Marketers of biscuits need to understand these socio-cultural aspects to be profitable in Ethiopia. However, in order to succeed, tension between orthodoxy and secularism needs to be well understood. The study is of benefit to the food industry in general and Orthodox Christians in particular, in Ethiopia. The study reveals religious factors affecting the demand for food consumed during fasts observed by the Orthodox Ethiopian Christians. The study reveals that the demand for biscuits-for-fasts is attractive for marketers; and identifies that religious tensions are a threat to marketing organizations, if unattended.

Key words: Consumer behavior, Orthodox Christians, religion, fasting, biscuits, marketing, Ethiopia.

INTRODUCTION

Culture in developing countries plays a crucial role in determining food patterns (Lahsaeizadeh, 2001). It has been widely recognized that ideas about what is healthy or good can influence food choice (Keane and Willetts, 1994), but food patterns and nutrition values change over time, because of cultural, social, economic and political factors. Religious-beliefs play a significant role in shaping social behavior where differences in religious affiliations tend to influence the way people live, the choices they make, the food they eat, and with whom they associate (Fam et al., 2004). Associated with religion are inbuilt beliefs that dictate what a person can eat and what he

cannot (Onuorah et al., 2003). In many instances, religion may be regarded as the mainspring of culture setting principles for life, and influencing attitudes (Kinsey, 1988). There is no dearth of references on the influences of religious-beliefs on individual and social behavior. However, a review of pertinent literature reflects an absence of material that deals directly with the religious taboos on bakery products, particularly biscuits to be eaten during fasts, henceforth addressed as 'biscuits-for-fasts'. Orthodox Christians' fasting in Ethiopia is unique and influences the food people eat in the country. Animal products such as meat, milk and milk related products (curd, butter etc.) are not supposed to be eaten during fasts. Huffnagel (1961; p.20) observes that "An Ethiopian Christian fasts for about half of the days in a year. On those days he does not touch any animal food products - not even milk, butter or eggs." This makes marketing of

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biscuits containing animal products a highly sensitive issue during fasts.

There are evidences of religious and cultural taboos in other parts of the world that reveal diverse, but sensitive, food consumption practices (Lai, 2000; Wright et al., 2001; Sheikh and Thomas, 1994). The food practices of humans are determined by values, attitudes, beliefs, and environmental and religious circumstances; all of which are the products of tradition, culture, and contacts (Onuorah et. al., 2003). Wright et al. (2001) also find that marketers need to dynamically recognize the tensions between the values and sentiments associated with deep-rooted local cultures. Furthermore, several established and emerging trends affect food consumption decisions that individuals make (Verbeke et al., 2005). Marketers cannot deny that the established trends in food consumption cannot be affected by the emerging ones. For example, the Orthodox Ethiopian Christians, who until recently were eating home made breads during fasts can be made accustomed to factory-made biscuits-adhering to the use of admissible ingredients and purity in the production process. Kinsey (1988) observes "Because many major religions in developing countries emphasize spiritual rather than materialistic gains and tend to be fatalistic; they might, if taken to their logical conclusions, promote negative attitudes to a wider range of goods and services" Therefore, cultural, particularly religious, factors demand attention of the marketers of certain products. Negligence on the part of marketers of certain products in understanding the impact of religious factors may change the market potential for those products. Food products account for a majority of trade within Ethiopia. The objective of this paper is to reveal the attitude of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians towards consumption of biscuits during fasts and to assess the impact of such socio-cultural factors as far as the demand for biscuits is concerned.

DESCRIPTION OF ETHIOPIAN CULTURE AND PEOPLE

Ethiopian culture is highly influenced by Christianity and is very traditional in nature. This tradition is well documented in parchment manuscripts in Ge'ez - the classic Ethiopian language (Ministry of Information, 1973; Ethiopian Airlines Magazine 2005). Historian Conti-Rossini characterized Ethiopia as a rich cultural mosaic of 80 languages and dialects representing cultural variations (Hancock and Yot, 1986, p.20). Notwithstanding, Ethiopia is one of the least developed countries in the world with an estimated population of about 75 million (as per CSA, July 2006 Population forecast). About 16% of the population lives in urban areas. Income, age, and religion are the most important variables in its demographic composition and create a sort of implicit segmentation for marketers of food products.

Income

Based on income, the Ethiopian market can be segmented into three classes viz. upper, middle and lower. The upper class contains consumers with a yearly income of more than Birr (Birr is the Ethiopian Currency written as ETB and consists of 100 Cents. One USD is approximately equivalent to 10 ETB) 12,600. It constitutes 13.3% of the urban population. The middle class constitutes a large market with people having an annual income between Birr 2,000 – 12,599. It accounts for 79.2% households of the urban population. The lower-class accounts for about 7.4% of the urban population with an annual income of less than Birr 2000 (CSA: 1999/2000).

Age

Age is another important variable that is one of the important factors to be considered in marketing biscuits-for-fasts. According to CSA (1999/2000), around 50% of the population in Ethiopia is less than 20 years and only a few are over 60 years. For marketers of biscuits-for-fasts, the two age groups (between 10 -20 years and 21 to 60) that account for the majority of the population are very important.

Religion

The 1994 population census of Ethiopia (CSA, 1994) indicates that Orthodox Christians form the largest religious group (50.6 %) followed by the Muslims (32.8 %), Protestants (10.2 %), traditional religion (5.3 %), Catholics and others (1.1%). Amharas and Tigreans are the major ethnic groups. More than 90% of the people belonging to the Amhara and Tigrean tribes are Orthodox Christians (CSA, 1994). Huffnagel (1961; p. 20) observes that both Amharas and Tigreans are Coptic Christians who strictly observe the rules in their consumption of food products. This indicates that Orthodox Christians and the associated ethnic groups belong to a similar socio-cultural setup that may substantially impact the demand for biscuits-for-fasts.

THE ROLE OF FASTING WITHIN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

Orthodox Christians follow the Jewish tradition of fasting. However instead of Monday and Thursday, they fast on Wednesday and Friday - Wednesday because on this day the Jews conspired against Christ, and Friday because it was the day of His Crucifixion (cf. Canon 69 of the Apostles). The Ethiopian Orthodox Christians follow fasts in a way similar to other Orthodox Christians but

Table 1. Consumption of food products in Ethiopia (in Tons).

Food Items	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002	Total	% Contribution
Biscuits	6694	10567	9080	11781	16607	4925	59654	4
Galletta (Kochero biscuits)	2756	2445	11601	9182	5777	2130	33891	3
Sweet*	800	1896	1281	1433	1440	1600	8450	1
Cornflakes			5.7	0.5	10.4	3.1	19.7	0
Wafers	645	2298	1108	1724	1687	1573	9035	1
Baby Foods (Imported)	0.3	45	70	185	180	847	1327	0
Baby food (Fafa, Dube, Ediget and Metin)	4704	4684	6183	9983	11693	9216	46463	3
Wheat flour	140499	105157	167526	185437	165345	142541	906505	67
Other flours	0	344	344	1147	274	891	3000	0
Macaroni and pasta	17646	19872	23999	29688	26214	23258	140677	10
Bread	20772	27029	19263	30765	26603	19979	144411	11
Grand total	194516	174337	240461	281326	255830	206963	1353433	100
Growth rate		-10%	38%	17%	-9%	-19%	3%	

Source: Derived using data from central statistics authority & customs authority of Ethiopia.* Sweets includes wafers, candies, chewing gums and chocolate

with a frequency of approximately 250 days in a year. There are seven official fasting periods for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians that include (i) all Wednesday and Fridays, except for the 50 days after Easter; (ii) the Lent (In Western Christianity, Lent is the period from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, the day before Easter Sunday. In Eastern Christianity, the period before Easter is known as Great Lent to distinguish it from the Winter Lent, or Advent. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lent>). To the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Lent (Hudadi or Abiy Tsom) means a period of fasting when the faithful undergo a rigorous schedule of prayers and penitence. This fast is observed with greater rigor than any other fast and it is a test of one's Christianity. One who fails to keep it is not considered a good Christian. The faithful should abstain from all food except bread, water and salt. It consists of 56 days, all meat is forbidden, and also, what are called "lactina," milk, butter, cheese, eggs, etc. On all the fasting days only one meal is allowed and this is to be taken in the afternoon, at 3 P.M. or in the evening. On Saturdays and Sundays people are allowed to eat in the morning. See, <http://www.visual2000.com/lent98.htm>] (iii) the Nineveh fast of 3 days; (iv) the vigils, or gahad of Christmas and Epiphany; (v) the fast of the apostles (Commemorating St. Peter and St. Paul, this fast varies in length, depending upon the date of Easter, and covers a minimum of 14 days and maximum of 44); (vi) the fast of the prophets of 43 days; and (vii) the fast of the assumption, 15 days in August. All these fasts are considered obligatory for every devout Orthodox Christian; except children under seven, pregnant women, the seriously sick persons, or travelers.

Bishop Epiphanius in Heretics 65 and also Canon 50 of Laodicea commands that during the fast of Lent, dry

bread and the practice of continence are incumbent. This reveals the importance of bread during fasts in Orthodox Christianity. In a nutshell, the religious beliefs in Ethiopia lead to the observation of fast by almost 38 million people for 250 days on an average. This opens big windows of opportunity for marketers of complying food products.

THE FOOD AND BISCUIT INDUSTRY IN ETHIOPIA

The Food Industry in Ethiopia is one of the fastest growing industries amid growing population and urbanization. It contributes approximately 30% of the gross value of production realized by manufacturing sector as a whole (CSA Report, 1999/2000). Out of a total number of 788 operating industrial enterprises reported by the Central Statistics Authority of Ethiopia (CSA: 1999/2000), about 200 are in the food sectors. Generally, the food industry operates at a small-scale level -mainly on manufacturing of grain mill products, bakery products, and prepared foods. The average annual compound rate of growth recorded in food-manufacturing over the decade was about 15% in 1999/2000 (CSA Report, 1999/2000).

Table 1 indicates the production/ import of food products in Ethiopia during 1996-2002. The average yearly volume of the grain mill products, bakery products, and prepared food was 225,572 tons (Amharic is Ethiopian National Language) during 1996/97 – 2001/02 – revealing an average growth of 3%. The estimates of CSA, however, seem to be a very conservative.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The overall objectives of the research lies in describing

Table 2. Profile of sample respondents

Age	Percent	Marital status		Ethnicity	
Under 25	34.6	Married	28.4	Amhara	77.8
26-39	55.6	Unmarried	70.4	Tigrean	14.8
Over 40	9.9	Widowed/ Divorced	1.2	Others	7.4
Education		Job status		Job level	
Secondary	6.2	Student	21.0	Lower	8.6
Graduate	69.7	Business	22.2	Middle	30.9
Professional	22.2	Service	54.3	Supervisory	16.0
Other	3.7	Other	2.5	Top	3.7
				Undisclosed	40.7
Gender					
Male	16				
Female	84				

and understanding Ethiopian Orthodox Christians' behavior in relation to biscuits-for-fasts in light with socio-cultural taboos. It is evident that the food industry commands a higher importance in Ethiopian context. Most of the Ethiopian population is fed on bakery products after 'Enjira' [The Enjira is a "pancake like bread" that is made up of grain Teff, used to pick up other foods]. As the majority of the population belongs to a poor section of the Ethiopian society, the role of bakeries or the biscuit industry becomes important in offering food products to diverse groups. The challenge is not only to offer bakery products to the diverse population but also such products that conform to religious expectations. The following questions arise:

- i) What religious taboos affect Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in their consumption of food products and how they impact on the demand for the recently introduced biscuits-for-fasts?
- ii) How Orthodox population, their religious leaders, marketers, and retailers perceive about the introduction of biscuits-for-fasts and what opportunities and threats introduction of biscuits-for-fasts offer to these stakeholders?
- iii) What causes tension between orthodox traditions and secularization in consumption of biscuits-for-fasts, taking account of the sentiments and views of consumers and the religious leaders?
- iv) What actions are expected from the marketers of such products to serve the customers well?

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in two stages. The first stage of research comprised an examination of the literature using desk research. In the second stage, both qualitative and quantitative research techniques were applied. During the qualitative research, data were collected through in-depth diagnostic interviews struc-

tured around a set of probing questions related to biscuits in general and biscuits-for-fasts in particular. The funnel approach (Aaker, Kumar and Day, 1995; Burns and Bush, 1995) was used in conducting semi structured interviews. Fifteen religious leaders (Priests and Deacons of age 22 and above) were interviewed at three major Orthodox Churches - namely St. George, St. Gabriel, and St. Trinity in Addis Ababa in order to obtain their opinions on factory-made biscuits-for-fasts. Starting with topics about food to be used during fasts, the focus was gradually narrowed towards biscuits-for-fasts and the associated religious concerns. A jury of executive opinion meet was conducted with 6 marketing/ sales managers of 4 major biscuits producers in Addis Ababa (that is, from NAS Foods, 2-Brothers, East Africa Holdings and KOJJ Biscuits Factory) moderated by the researchers. Among the qualitative rather than quantitative forecasting techniques (such as regression or exponential smoothing), jury of executive opinion is widely practiced all over the globe for long-term forecasting (Sanders and Manrodt, 1994). As, according to Peterson (1990, p. 16), sales executives are "better acquainted with customer behavior and actions of competitors than other executives", this study incorporated marketing/sales managers as executives in the jury for gaining insights on the issues and assessing the demand.

For the quantitative study, 200 questionnaires were distributed to college students in Addis Ababa both from private and government colleges to identify their biscuit consumption habits during fasting periods and associated behavior. Out of 125 questionnaires that were received, 90 questionnaires qualified for Orthodox Christians. Only 81 such questionnaires were found complete and were used in further analysis using SPSS. Profile of these respondents is mentioned in Table 2. The sample included part-time (extension education) and full-time students of age between 20 - 60, of both the sex, from different ethnic backgrounds and regions. The sample was intended to cover relevant demographic distributions, rather than to obtain statistical representativeness. Students were purposely selected to represent the population to secure frank opinions on this issue, which would otherwise have been a sensitive issue to discuss with general population. Students' attitudes were measured using 12 statements on Likert Scale. Cronbach Alpha score for this attitudinal scale was observed as 0.8090 which establishes that the scales were reliable (Nunnally, 1978). In another survey, the selves at 40 retail shops in Addis Ababa were examined for the impact of the fasting season's particularly the Lent on the sale of biscuit. The results of the findings were triangulated in light of the revelations made by priests, students, and retail store owners.

Table 3. One-sample test result measuring attitudes of respondents*

	Test value = 0					
	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
					Lower	Upper
I do observe fasts as stipulated by my religion	52.326	80	.000	4.111	3.95	4.27
I do observed the religious rules carefully	53.825	80	.000	4.333	4.17	4.49
I do consume biscuits-for-fast during the fasts	47.557	80	.000	4.074	3.90	4.24
I believe that other too eat such biscuits during their fasts	37.889	80	.000	3.963	3.75	4.17
I don't have any inhibition in consuming such biscuits	42.625	80	.000	4.198	4.00	4.39
I do believe that biscuit manufacturer observe purity in the production process	39.323	80	.000	4.074	3.87	4.28
My family members too eat biscuits-for-fast during fasting	36.079	80	.000	3.617	3.42	3.82
I am aware that some religious leaders do not support consumption of Biscuits-for-fasts	36.811	80	.000	4.012	3.80	4.23
I do not impose restriction from my side on my friends and relatives	32.879	80	.000	3.864	3.63	4.10
Marketers of Biscuits-for-fast need to aware consumers and religious leaders	49.554	80	.000	4.185	4.02	4.35
There was some resistance among our community member towards their consumption	49.719	80	.000	4.259	4.09	4.43
Our community members largely support the consumption of biscuits-for-fasts	43.622	80	.000	4.0988	3.912	4.286

*The responses were measured using Likert Scale starting 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

RESULTS

Consumers Survey revealed that, of the 81 Orthodox Christian students surveyed, 68% (55 students) were strict Orthodox Christians who were following the religion as expected by the religious norms. Out of which 87% (about 48) were found eating biscuits-for-fasts while observing fasts. The remaining (Estimated using national calendar for 2006) declined to use such biscuits while observing fasts. These students confirmed that they are served well by fasting biscuit manufacturers. Their responses to some of the attitude measurement statements are presented in Table 3. The statements and their test scores and significance indicate that biscuits-for-fasts have positioned positively among this target group which represents almost all the sections of the society.

Retail trade survey revealed that the major buyers of biscuits are of two types – wholesalers and retailers; and NGOs and Military institutions. These can be classified as business and institutional consumers respectively. Wholesalers are mainly concentrated in Addis Ababa and earn high volume of sales at a low profit margin. Retailers, who constitute quite a large number, sell biscuits directly to the consumers at a relatively high profit margin. The existing retail margin ranges from 20- 25%. Responses from the owner of retail shops in Addis Ababa indicated that 72% of

their biscuits sales during the Lent are from biscuits-for-fasts. It was realized that the sales for biscuits during non-fasting periods is usually less than fasting periods. Retailers were also observed to check the availability of biscuits-for-fasts. The survey found that NAS's Hip Hop fasting biscuit was available in 85% of the trade outlets followed by Etalem Plc's Lovely and East African Holding's Micky Biscuits-for-fasts -having equal presence (70%) in all the trade outlets surveyed. This indicates that biscuits-for-fasts are well accepted by the society.

Interaction with jury-of-executives revealed that, in Ethiopia, biscuits-traditionally known as "*Galetta*" or "*Kochero*", were mainly produced by government owned companies for military supplies. However, as production increased, distribution expanded to cover the remaining population. Number of entrepreneurs increased responding to the growth and popularity gained by the first-movers. At present, there are twelve major local firms in the biscuits industry. Most of these are performing poorly, for they lack management and technological know-how akin to MNCs. Easy entry of new firms, bargaining power of suppliers and buyers, local competition and the availability of substitutes continue to pose threats to the existing players. The industry is extremely vulnerable to price variations and changes by the suppliers predominantly in sugar and wheat. Substitute products such as

wafers, sweets, home made products, and commercial bread threatens the industry with the increasing cost of biscuit production. Home made breads or biscuits (e.g. *Dabo* and *Ambasha*) are alternatives for lower-class population despite being considered as unhygienic and crude.

The retail prices of biscuits-for-fasts range from 25 cents to Birr 1.00 per packet. The jury assessed the overall market potential for biscuits to be about 30,000 tons with a per-capita consumption of about 400 gm of biscuits per person per year. The competition in the biscuit market is not yet fully developed and is based mainly on size of products, price, design, packaging, brand, and promotion. Despite competition, the twelve firms are operating at small-and-medium scales. Barriers for new entrants are relatively low in terms of capital requirement and skills. It was found that six more companies are close to joining this market. Substitute products such as wafers, sweets and bread are possible threats to the biscuits market. Most of the firms (8 in numbers or 67%) are not yet liberated from owner managers and lack vision, specialization, innovation, capital, leadership, flexibility, and ability to take risk. These firms put high degree of emphasis on sales- as marketing concept is not well developed. Since most of them are extensions of the flour businesses, they attempt to emulate their competitors in adopting strategies such as brand nomenclature (for example Hi- Ho against Hip Hop biscuit) and packaging.

Currently, there are 6 major companies (NAS Foods Plc, East Africa Holdings, Etalem Plc, KOJJ Plc, 2 Brothers Biscuits and Flour Factory, and Chereka Plc.) that serve the market with biscuits-for-fasts. Other companies are not yet capable of introducing biscuits-for-fasts irrespective of the attractive market potential. Marketing professionals face difficulties in applying proper segmentation methods; demographic variables such as income and age, by default act as segmentation variable, given the scant availability of data in the country. Improving the awareness levels of consumers; encouraging brand trial and purchase in cities; and penetration to the rural market are the major challenges. More challenging is to convince Church authorities and followers regarding the ingredients and process of production of biscuits-for-fasts.

The interviews with religious leaders revealed that all the religious leaders were found to be aware of biscuits-for-fasts. However, 53% of them expressed their reluctance to buy and eat those because of their lack of confidence on ingredients and the preparation process. They were concerned that such biscuits should be prepared with separate baking ovens and packaging equipments or machines avoiding physical contacts with not-for-fasting foods. They were also asked whether they allow their followers to consume biscuits-for-fasts. The overwhelming majority, 67% of them were found to be negative or indecisive. Out of those, particularly the elderly priests (that constitute 53 or 8%) having age 31

and above, were more conservative towards the consumption of biscuits-for-fasts. They do not even expect their close friends and relatives to eat biscuits-for-fasts. Two of them (13.3%) were indecisive. In fact, it was surprising to note that some of them associate biscuits and other sweets as means of wooing the Orthodox Christian to convert to Protestantism, Catholicism or even Islam. However, 47% of the respondents of an age under-30 were found willing to eat biscuits-for-fasts. 28% of those (the young priests and deacons) responded that they eat biscuits-for-fasts but so with some doubt. These respondents were more open to change and were found to check the list of ingredients written over the packages of biscuits-for-fasts.

DISCUSSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

According to the 1999 population survey of CSA, the Ethiopian Population will be about 83 million in 2010. The 1994 census report reveals that 50.6% of the population of the country practices Orthodox Christianity. Assuming this percentage still valid, the Orthodox Christian population can be estimated around 42 million in 2010. Although an orthodox Christian begins fasting at the age of 7, the data classification of CSA makes it difficult to identify the size of population having an age between 7 and 9 years. On the modest side, if we consider the population with the age of 10 and above, the fasting population works out to be approximately 70% of Orthodox Christian population. Based on this fact, and assuming everybody in this category strictly fasts, the market for biscuits-for-fasts can conservatively be estimated at about 30 million. Taking the per-capita consumption of 400 g biscuits per year and the 250 days of fasting in a year, the total annual market size for biscuits-for-fasts emerges as 8200 tons [Arrived using Table 2 by dividing total quantity of food products (1353433) by 6 years].

Biscuits-for-fasts marketing companies need to address both commercial and socio-cultural factors. Under the socio-cultural factors, religion is one that can be understood in terms of sub-factors viz. size of Orthodox population, degree of liberalization, and authority of religious leaders. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians are the major opinion makers, consumers and followers within the country with their political and administrative dominance. The congregations in different orthodox churches on every Sunday find more than 3000- 4000 followers in a single church (Bible Society of Ethiopia, 2006). The commitment of followers to religion can be understood through the work of Hancock (1993, pp.26, 253) who describes their following of food proscriptions very closely to those outlined in the book of Leviticus. Though some sort of liberalization is being witnessed where some researchers finds churches to be more open and less dogmatic in their approach to traditional practices in Africa (Kirby, 2002), it is not that easy keeping in view the

hard bound faith and the long tradition of Christianity.

Religious orthodoxy continues to place some tensions in this process of secularization. The opposition towards the acceptance of biscuits-for-fasts by some religious leaders gives a basic glimpse of this tension. The influence of Christianity to the inhabitants of Ethiopia can be analyzed in terms of the number of national holidays where out of 14 public holidays, 6 accounts for Christians, 3 for Muslims and the rest for national occasions [Total demand = 8219178 kg (30 million × .400 g × (250/365) or 2.05 million cartons (A carton of biscuit is on average 4 kg, thus 8219 tons will be 2.05 million cartons)]. The holidays and the festivities are very ceremonial and encourage the followers to behave in the most religious way. The people, who do not fast during the year, commit themselves to strict fasting during these occasions particularly during Lent. Priests advise their followers as to the nature of punishment for sins confessed. As such, the role of priests cannot be unvalued; their verdict carries enormous social weight.

Consumer choice is being affected triangularly by religious leaders, strict followers, and the liberals. Still some of the followers, (mainly people in the age group over 40) are suspicious of the biscuits-for-fasts because of their containing ingredients forbidden during fasting. Liberals found themselves in dilemmas while eating with peers -who adhere more strictly to fasts. Most of the liberals belong to younger generation (under 25) who perceive fasts as healthy exercise e.g. a way to reduce cholesterol. They are the main targets of Bible Society to nurture their commitment back to the religion (www.biblesociety.org)

One can identify more factors that may affect the market demand for biscuits-for-fasts. In view of the poverty and religious conviction in the country, the challenge for marketers lies not only in making the biscuit products available to this large consumer group, but also in affordable terms. More mature production and marketing activities are needed to be practiced. Further, since individual priorities for food choice change throughout the life-cycle with respect to social class, ethnicity and gender; any moves to change eating habits need to take the social and cultural framework into account (Keane and Willetts, 1994). One important factor here is the literacy rate (28.9% as per CSA) of the Orthodox Christian population. This implies that biscuit marketers need to focus more on verbal communications than written ones.

Conclusion

Socio-cultural environment, particularly religion, plays an important role in consumers' acceptance of products particularly biscuits. The fasts observed by the Orthodox Christian Church in Ethiopia bring a unique example of religious influence on food products. Biscuit marketing companies have innovatively introduced biscuits-for-fasts

for the fasting population. A majority of the followers exhibited positive attitude towards these biscuits and have started consuming these during fasts. The market for these biscuits is substantial; however, marketers of biscuits need to understand the socio-cultural aspects, more particularly the tensions between orthodoxy and secularism. Opposition towards the acceptance of biscuits-for-fasts by religious leaders reveals some orthodoxy and tensions towards liberalization. Despite this innovation, the commercial viability of demand for biscuits-for-fasts will be highly affected by religious factors in long run. There is no doubt that the practice of fasting bestows lucrative opportunity to marketers of food products in Ethiopia. However, to capitalize on such issues, marketers need to assess the needs, requirements and sentiments of target markets. Sensitivity of target group needs to be better taken care of, for any foul play on the part of marketers may change the business proposition overnight. Furthermore, better marketing strategies are to be devised to extend their reach to the mass and also to contain competition from substitute products.

Importance, limitation and direction for future researches

The study proved to be important in revealing associations between religious aspects, beliefs and attitudes, and introduction of products particularly biscuits-for-fast. This helped in developing an altogether new literature addressing consumer behavior pertaining to a specific situation in Ethiopia. The outcomes of the study enlighten the marketers as well as academics in carrying out their efforts to face such challenges. This study was conducted over the respondents in Addis Ababa-the capital city that attract students from all the regions of Ethiopia. Though the sample represented Orthodox Christians with different ethnicity, gender, and status, but the size of the sample emerged somehow smaller because only 81 respondents qualified out of the target of 200. Cross tabulation and their significance using chi square test could not be performed because of small sample, as cell frequencies remained low across demographic variables. The study would have benefited if the general population in various regions would have formed the target rather than the students. Greater in-depth association would have secured had different study been targeted on retailers, marketers, religious leaders, and the general population. One study in South Africa indicates that with the spread of HIV, the demand for rice, pork, beef and milk is likely to decline, while that of maize, wheat, mutton, chicken and eggs will rise (Agbola et. al, 2004). The focus is on easily digestible, energetic and nutritional products. Though the study does not break it down to the requirement of biscuits, however, under such conditions demand for biscuits are bound to increase among HIV patients who form a sizeable majority

in Ethiopia. Keeping in view the Orthodox Christian population in Ethiopia, biscuits-for-fasts becomes a necessity for HIV infected people who put more faith in God and fasting as a mean to be relieved from the ailments. It is, therefore, important to bring into light the fasting habits, HIV and nutritional requirements. However, the paper does not take into account the impact of HIV on the demand for biscuits-for-fasts, which also indicates a direction for future research.

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