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**TESI DI DOTTORATO**

**Christian and Muslim Religious Factor in Contemporary  
Ethiopia: From Slavery and Slave Trade to Human Coexistence**

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## Riassunto

L'omissione dell'Islam negli studi etiopi e la necessità di un' esplorazione completa delle dinamiche dell'Islam in Etiopia siano state evidenziate da una nuova generazione di studiosi. Resta una convinzione persistente che la storia dell'Islam possa essere semplificata in una narrazione continua di conflitti perpetui ed inevitabili tra le comunità cristiane delle regioni montane e le popolazioni musulmane delle pianure.

La persistente questione della partecipazione musulmana alla formazione dell'unità nazionale etiopica e la sfida connessa di mantenere la coesistenza e la tolleranza reciproca tra i gruppi religiosi hanno profonde radici storiche.

Il panorama religioso dell'Etiopia è attualmente diversificato, con il cristianesimo e l'Islam come le due principali tradizioni religiose praticate dalla sua popolazione. L'ultimo censimento, condotto nel 2007 dal governo degli Stati Uniti, ha stimato che il 44 per cento della popolazione aderisce alla Chiesa ortodossa etiopica Tewahedo (EOTC), il 34 per cento è musulmano sunnita e il 19 per cento appartiene a gruppi cristiani evangelici e pentecostali.

Nel corso dei secoli, queste due religioni hanno interagito, a volte armoniosamente e altre volte in conflitto, influenzando gli aspetti socioculturali, economici e politici della società etiopica. La percezione della relazione tra musulmani e cristiani è ancora oggi descritta da alcuni come consensuale, pacifica e tollerante, ma da altri come violenta, conflittuale e intollerante. Il periodo storico caratterizzato dal consolidamento definitivo del cristianesimo in Abissinia ha avuto inizio alla fine del XIII e XIV secolo dopo un lungo e arduo processo di evangelizzazione: l'Islam aveva già stabilito una presenza significativa nella regione.

La compresenza religiosa ha portato alla formazione di percorsi pellegrini misti, in particolare nel corso del XIX e XX secolo. Quello che rende infatti unico il pellegrinaggio in Etiopia è il suo carattere trans-religioso, poiché lungo questi percorsi i credenti sia cristiani che musulmani hanno partecipato alla formazione di un'identità condivisa, presenziando insieme alle lunghe

processioni - talvolta ancora solo per mera curiosità. La differenza fondamentale tra i diversi centri di pellegrinaggio in Etiopia risiede principalmente nella loro tipologia architettonica: i centri cristiani sono generalmente costruiti intorno a una chiesa, mentre i centri musulmani sono costruiti vicino a luoghi e santuari che commemorano la vita e i gesti più di individui illustri.

I confini religiosi non vengono completamente rimossi o eliminati ma temporaneamente “sospesi”, favorendo la crescita di uno spazio pubblico come luogo di incontro, evocazione e coesistenza, anche, con gli spiriti, tema molto caro alla tradizione religiosa africana.

L'Islam in Etiopia è stato analizzato attentamente nel 1965 da J. S. Trimingham, il quale ha riferito che i musulmani etiopici non solo hanno modificato il “codice originale” dell'Islam, ma sembrava anche che lo avessero volgarizzato, una dicotomia quindi tra Islam “africano” e non più solo “arabo”. Trimingham riconosceva infatti la presenza di forme devianti rispetto all'Islam originale, un processo di “vernacularizzazione” che ha messo in evidenza la possibilità di adattamento a contesti geografici diversi e può essere descritto come avente un “significato adattativo”.

Cristiani e Musulmani hanno coesistito per secoli anche per via del commercio, almeno fino all'ascesa al potere del *Negus Neghesti* Haile Selassie. Nonostante il loro ruolo quasi monopolistico nel commercio, i mercanti arabi erano spesso visti con sospetto: durante i periodi in cui l'Etiopia era in contrasto con i Turchi, si credeva ampiamente che un considerevole numero di mercanti musulmani agisse come spie, gettando un'ombra sulle loro attività.

Il *Kebra Negast* regolava l'acquisto, la proprietà e la manomissione degli schiavi e proibiva espressamente la vendita dei cristiani ai non credenti. I cristiani stessi potevano comprare schiavi ma era loro vietata la partecipazione alla vendita di schiavi. Questa restrizione si applicava esclusivamente ai cristiani, mentre i musulmani erano liberi di impegnarsi nella vendita di schiavi. Secondo la legge mosaica, gli infedeli e la loro discendenza potevano essere schiavizzati, e la tradizione islamica stabiliva che l'acquisizione iniziale degli schiavi dovesse avvenire durante guerre o razzie. Di conseguenza, si verificarono un aumento

delle razzie per la cattura di schiavi e dei conflitti nelle regioni più meridionali dell'Etiopia. La consapevolezza del divieto di schiavizzare i credenti portò a molti casi di conversione come strategia per evitare la cattura. Questa differenziazione permise ai musulmani di stabilire un vero e proprio monopolio, rafforzando così le loro esportazioni di schiavi in regioni come l'Arabia, il Sudan, l'Egitto e persino l'India.

Il declino del fenomeno della schiavitù in Etiopia può essere fatto risalire a un cambiamento nelle priorità dei vari principi che cercavano maggiore controllo sull'impero, ed anche nel consenso sociale. Questa transizione divenne evidente nella metà del XIX secolo, anche se con molte resistenze.

Nel corso del Novecento i musulmani hanno cercato di essere riconosciuti come etiopi su un piano di parità con gli altri cittadini, enfatizzando la loro identità come “musulmani etiopi” piuttosto che semplicemente “musulmani che vivono in Etiopia”.

Con la rivoluzione del 1974 e l'acquisizione formale dell'autorità da parte del PMAC, l'intero quadro legale della nazione è rimasto in uno stato di “sospensione”: infatti il Derg, prominente giunta militare, respinse la Bozza di Costituzione del 1974. In seguito all'abbattimento del regime del Derg da parte dell'EPRDF nel 1991, le libertà religiose si sono ulteriormente ampliate. I nuovi governanti hanno riconosciuto l'importanza di rispettare le sensibilità e la fede dei loro cittadini. Il pluralismo religioso è diventato così essenziale non solo per il consenso politico, ma anche per l'effettivo allineamento con la filosofia del governo, quella del federalismo etno-regionale. L'articolo 27 della nuova Costituzione, adottato alla fine del 1994, ha permesso alle comunità religiose di esprimersi apertamente nella sfera pubblica, promuovendo l'uguaglianza e l'unità.

Se le elezioni nel 2000-2001 sono state segnate da irregolarità, portando a un limitato successo dell'opposizione, le elezioni del 2005 hanno visto una maggiore equità, ma sono state seguite da proteste, repressioni del governo e arresti di figure dell'opposizione. Nel 2018, il Primo Ministro Abiy Ahmed ha avviato riforme costituzionali e aperture politiche, segnando un significativo



cambiamento nella politica etiopica. Con la nuova Costituzione del 1995, l'Etiopia è rimasta uno stato laico, anche se alcuni gruppi religiosi, sia cristiani che musulmani, erano riluttanti ad accettare pienamente questo modello. Con l'avvento della libertà di stampa, sono emerse numerose pubblicazioni islamiche, che hanno favorito un rinnovato senso di autoconsapevolezza tra i musulmani etiopi.

Oggi la registrazione e l'approvazione di gruppi religiosi ricadono sotto la competenza della Direzione degli Affari Religiosi del Ministero della Pace. I gruppi religiosi non registrati devono presentare documenti fondativi, carte d'identità nazionali dei loro fondatori e l'indirizzo permanente della loro istituzione religiosa e delle sedi regionali. La legge proibisce la formazione di partiti politici basati sulla religione.

La crescita del Salafismo ha affrontato notevoli sfide durante l'era del regime del Derg, che cercava di sopprimere le attività religiose. L'espansione rapida del Salafismo, tuttavia, ha portato a una comunità musulmana più frammentata e a tensioni crescenti all'interno della stessa. I custodi dei santuari e i leader tradizionali hanno espresso preoccupazione per la diminuzione del numero di pellegrini e la graduale scomparsa delle pratiche consolidate. Sebbene gli scontri violenti siano rari, le dispute assumevano principalmente una natura retorica, con ciascuna parte che accusava l'altra di deviare dalla vera fede. Inoltre, l'approccio polemico è evidente in dispute concrete, come la costruzione di nuove chiese e moschee. Il numero di tali strutture religiose è aumentato significativamente dal 1991, in particolare nel caso delle moschee, portando a dibattiti e resistenze riguardo alle loro ubicazioni. Inoltre, sorgono dispute riguardo al riconoscimento e alla costruzione di monumenti storici, spesso legati a dibattiti sulla venerazione dei luoghi storici.

Mentre la maggior parte dei salafiti accoglierebbe favorevolmente un ruolo ampliato per i tribunali della *sharia*, compresa la possibilità di punizioni corporali, generalmente si considera l'incorporazione della *sharia* nel sistema governativo come impraticabile in Etiopia.

Il movimento Tabligh, al contrario, evita il coinvolgimento diretto in politica e si concentra sull'islamizzazione della società attraverso sforzi individuali per condurre gli altri all'Islam. Tuttavia, in alcune aree, le reti Tabligh sono state influenzate da gruppi più politicizzati.

Il movimento Intellettualista ha una posizione più elaborata sulla politica. Propugna una rappresentanza equa dei musulmani nella vita pubblica e immagina un ambiente politico che promuova il rispetto reciproco e la convivenza tra le religioni. Gli Intellettualisti sostengono che la libertà religiosa possa essere garantita solo sotto un governo laico. Le posizioni di questi movimenti sulla politica e le loro interazioni con i cristiani mettono in luce l'impatto del contesto locale sulla ricezione e l'adattamento delle correnti di pensiero trans-locali.

L'impegno del Primo Ministro Abiy Ahmed ha spinto i rappresentanti della comunità musulmana a concordare di sostituire l'IASC (noto anche come il *Majlis*) con un consiglio di transizione di *ulama* o studiosi musulmani. Il Primo Ministro, accompagnato dalla Ministra della Pace Muferiat Kamil, si è rivolto ai leader musulmani il 1° maggio e ha dichiarato: "Una comunità musulmana unita è la base dell'unità nazionale". L'obiettivo del consiglio di transizione composto da 23 membri è preparare il quadro legale e istituzionale per una nuova struttura di leadership per la comunità musulmana.

Il discorso politico contemporaneo in Etiopia ha subito una significativa trasformazione dalla caduta del regime etio-comunista sotto la guida del Derg. L'identità etnica ha ora assunto una importanza predominante nei discorsi politici, nelle politiche economiche e educative, nonché nella governance regionale e locale. È considerata il principale determinante attraverso il quale gli individui esercitano i loro diritti democratici. In questo contesto, anche l'identità religiosa è stata inglobata, e le persone non sono più semplicemente categorizzate come musulmani o cristiani, ma sono delineate come, ad esempio, musulmani oromo o afar, o cristiani amhara o gurage. Di conseguenza, è iniziata una lotta per l'appartenenza tra affiliazione religiosa ed etnia. Dopo il Derg, l'EPRDF fu guidato da ex studenti degli anni '60 che lavorarono per stabilire

questo sistema che riconosceva le identità periferiche, anche se significava rafforzarle.

Abiy Ahmed ha anche gradualmente affermato la sua opposizione al sistema istituzionale del federalismo etnico volto a garantire una rappresentanza equa per tutti i popoli etiopi. L'attuale crisi mette a confronto due visioni dello stato etiopico: federalista, con il riconoscimento del ruolo politico dell'etnia, o centralizzatore ed assimilazionista. Il TPLF e l'OLA tendono alla prima; il governo di Abiy Ahmed e i nazionalisti amhara preferiscono la seconda.

La politica etiopica di contenimento non ha portato alla chiusura delle sue frontiere, che sono vaste e porose, difficili da controllare, e caratterizzate anche dagli spostamenti dei pastori. La religione viene attivamente costruita come l'identità normativa e dominante dei cittadini da parte dei leader comunitari e religiosi. Questa costruzione è legata al ruolo sociale distintivo della religione come fonte di solidarietà comunitaria, conforto spirituale e una legittima alternativa per l'identità collettiva. Tuttavia, la costruzione competitiva dell'identità ruota attorno alla ricerca della verità e della supremazia religiosa nella sfera pubblica, con implicazioni per l'identità nazionale etiopica più ampia. Questo discorso religioso antagonista sta ridefinendo gli spazi pubblici in Etiopia, spesso riempiendo il vuoto lasciato dalla politica a causa del declino – nell'era Derg - del dibattito democratico e delle libertà. L'equilibrio tra le fedi e tra le comunità religiose e lo stato è delicato. La complessa relazione tra religione ed etnia ha anche implicazioni per la posizione della comunità musulmana sulle questioni politiche. Ad esempio, la risposta della comunità musulmana a un potenziale conflitto potrebbe essere divisa lungo linee etniche, con i musulmani del nord più favorevoli al regime e i musulmani del sud, in particolare gli oromo e i somali, più contrari. Questa divisione mette in luce la sfida di superare i confini etnici all'interno della comunità musulmana. Entrambi questi fattori giocano un ruolo significativo nella formazione di identità e affiliazioni.

La proclamazione del giugno 2020 che concede la parità di status rappresenta una risposta storica alle sfide affrontate dai musulmani etiopi nella storia moderna. Ha diverse implicazioni: il riconoscimento della longevità storica dell'Islam in Etiopia contribuisce a dissipare la securitizzazione dell'Islam e dei

musulmani etiopi, promuovendo un senso di orgoglio nella loro ricca storia paragonabile a quella del cristianesimo. Riconosce anche i musulmani etiopi come una società religiosa con un patrimonio che risale ai primi giorni dell'Islam, fornendo loro un senso di appartenenza collettiva alla loro storia. La disposizione legale si allinea con la realtà demografica attuale dei musulmani etiopi, che costituiscono una parte significativa della popolazione. Rimuove gli ostacoli legali, consentendo alle loro attività apolitiche di procedere senza intoppi. Infine, il riconoscimento della parità di status dissipa la mentalità d'assedio associata ai musulmani etiopi, alterando le percezioni ostili e sfidando la nozione di loro come una minaccia. Il processo di de-democratizzazione ha avuto ampie conseguenze in tutta la società etiopica, limitando le opportunità per l'opposizione politica ed erodendo le possibilità di contestare il regime. Un'importante indagine in questo contesto riguarda se il regime mostri una maggiore preoccupazione per gli sviluppi all'interno della comunità musulmana, dimostrando una maggiore vigilanza in questo settore e mostrandosi più risoluto nel monitorare, controllare e reprimere sviluppi indesiderati. Il recente coinvolgimento negli affari islamici attraverso la promozione del movimento al-Abhash suggerisce un'inclinazione in questa direzione.

## Objectives of the Study

The omission of Islam in Ethiopian studies and the necessity for a comprehensive exploration of Islam's dynamics within Ethiopia have been highlighted by a new generation of scholars, as in the case of E. Cerulli who criticized, in 1960, the underrepresentation of Islam in Ethiopian studies. Further research is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of a topic that has been largely overlooked, as reported by scholars such as J. Abbink, P. Desplat, T. Østebø and J. S. Trimingham, who have studied the dynamics in Ethiopia not only in contemporary times. In spite of these efforts, there remains a persistent belief that the history of Islam can be simplified into an ongoing narrative of perpetual and inevitable conflicts between the Christian communities in the highlands and the Muslim populations in the lowlands, a perspective still considered conventional wisdom. This recurring theme dominates much of recent historiography, depicting Islam as a perpetual threat to the survival of the Ethiopian state and even the national identity of Ethiopia itself.

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that positive interactions between Muslim and Christian Ethiopians may have had far more significant implications than the conflicts. Contrary to the claims of numerous authors, Islam should not be seen as an external historical force in Ethiopia. Over the extensive period from the decline of Aksum to the present day, Islam has been an integral component of Ethiopian culture.

Research in this regard remains incomplete and requires the attention of researchers, particularly concerning three contemporary “dynamics” that are defined as follows:

1. **Marginalization of Muslims in Ethiopia and its impact on their self-identity:** it is essential to investigate how the Muslim community in Ethiopia has been marginalized, affecting their self-definitions. It is important to note that images of Islam may not always be objective, and there may not have been significant steps towards genuine coexistence between the Muslim and Christian communities.

2. **The role of the 1974 Derg revolution in changing perceptions:** with the rise of the Derg revolution, there was an increase in attention towards Muslims in Ethiopia, and initial steps were taken towards their recognition. Understanding the implications and consequences of this period is crucial.
3. **The constitutional impact of the change of power in 1991 on religious freedom:** the change of power in 1991 marked a significant shift in Ethiopia's political landscape. It opened up a new public space for religious freedom and allowed for increased political participation and self-organization of Muslims. This shift was closely tied to Ethiopia's adoption of ethnic federalism and political decentralization, which aimed to guarantee rights to ethno-linguistic groups and provide opportunities for self-administration. However, challenges related to recognition and access to power within this framework need further exploration.

The “objectives” of this comprehensive study on the role of Christianity and Islam in contemporary Ethiopia, tracing their historical trajectory from the era of slavery and slave trade to the pursuit of peaceful coexistence, are multifaceted; they encompass a thorough exploration of the intricate dynamics between these two religious communities.

1. **Historical Context Analysis:** the primary objective of this study is to explore the historical context of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia. This involves an examination of the origins of their interactions and the profound influence of religious factors on the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of Ethiopian society. By analyzing historical archives, primary sources, and scholarly literature, this research aims to illuminate the historical evolution of Christian-Muslim relations. This entails highlighting critical events, shifts in power dynamics, and the religious foundations supporting these interactions. Special attention is placed on the analysis of the sacred topography associated with religious

sites in Ethiopia and the pilgrimage routes that have shaped a history of coexistence and shared utilization of certain sacred places. The examination of contemporary pilgrimage centers, which have pioneered steps toward coexistence, is integral to this analysis. Additionally, the study delves into the political and religious dynamics that have marked the relationship between Christians and Muslims from the late 19th century to the 1930 Imperial Era, characterized by an enduring struggle between the ideals of national unity and the attainment of collective identity.

2. **Impact of Historical Legacies:** another key objective is to investigate the enduring influence of historical legacies, particularly the era of slavery and the slave trade, on contemporary Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia. The slave trade left an indelible mark on the region, with well-organized caravan routes managed by Muslims. Understanding the legitimizing role derived from the *Kebra Negast*<sup>1</sup> allows researchers to comprehend how this economic coexistence was primarily driven by religious coexistence, governing the laws of the marketplace. By critically analyzing historical narratives, oral traditions, and existing scholarship, this research aims to identify how historical experiences, collective memory and perceptions of past injustices continue to shape present-day interactions between Christians and Muslims. This understanding of the long-lasting effects of historical events contributes to a nuanced comprehension of the current religious landscape and informs efforts towards reconciliation and healing.
  
3. **Role of Religious Leaders:** the third objective is to investigate the role of religious leaders in promoting interfaith dialogue, cultivating mutual understanding and fostering a culture of coexistence in Ethiopia. This includes an examination of their perspectives, strategies, and initiatives aimed at nurturing peaceful relations. The study comprehensively

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<sup>1</sup> See *glossary*.

analyses their contributions, spanning from Emperor Tewodros, Yohannes IV (1837-1889), Menelik II (1844-1913), Haile Selassie to the events of the Derg in 1974 and the rise of the EPRDF.

4. **Contemporary Landscape Analysis:** this research further seeks to analyze the contemporary landscape of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia. It takes into account the diverse expressions of religious identity and the evolving socio-political context. It also explores constitutional amendments, reforms, and public space dynamics; by focusing on contemporary Christian and Muslim identities in Ethiopia and considering the factors influencing interreligious coexistence, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the current state of affairs and the challenges that lie ahead.
5. **Evaluation of Interfaith Initiatives:** another objective is to examine existing interfaith dialogue initiatives and collaborative efforts in Ethiopia. The study assesses their effectiveness, identifies challenges, and explores their potential in fostering coexistence. This research evaluates the impact of interreligious dialogue platforms, educational programs, and community engagement initiatives in promoting understanding, countering prejudices, and building bridges between Christians and Muslims.
6. **Recommendations for Coexistence:** lastly, this study aims to provide practical recommendations for fostering religious coexistence in Ethiopia. Drawing on the research findings and insights, the objective is to propose actionable measures that can be implemented by religious leaders, policymakers, and civil society organizations. These recommendations may encompass strategies for strengthening interfaith dialogue, promoting religious tolerance, enhancing educational programs on religious diversity, and fostering socio-economic equality.



This comprehensive study deeply explore the interplay between Christianity and Islam in contemporary Ethiopia, tracing their historical trajectory from the era of slavery and slave trade to the pursuit of peaceful coexistence. The research strives to provide practical recommendations that can serve as a foundation for promoting interreligious dialogue, understanding, and peaceful coexistence, inspiring individuals, communities, and policymakers to work towards a future marked by unity and shared values.

## Research Questions

The research questions of this study on the Christian and Muslim religious factor in contemporary Ethiopia, tracing the journey from slavery and slave trade to human coexistence, are designed to explore the intricate dynamics, challenges, and potential solutions within the realm of Christian-Muslim relations. These six research questions serve as guiding pillars, shaping the direction of the study and providing a framework for the investigation.

1. **What are the historical foundations of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia, particularly in the context of the sacred topography and pilgrimage routes?** This research question aims to investigate the historical roots of the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, with a specific focus on the role of sacred places and pilgrimage routes. It seeks to uncover the origins and evolution of their interactions, taking into account the influence of historical events, power dynamics, and religious factors.
2. **What role do religious leaders play in fostering dialogue, understanding, and coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia?** This research question explores the influence and impact of religious leaders in shaping Christian-Muslim relations. It aims to investigate the perspectives, strategies, and initiatives undertaken by religious leaders to promote interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and collaboration.
3. **How do historical legacies, such as the era of slavery and slave trade, impact Christian-Muslim relations in contemporary Ethiopia?** The question addresses the impact of slavery and the slave trade on shaping the religious dynamics between these communities. This research question focuses on the long-lasting effects of historical events on present-day interactions between Christians and Muslims. It aims to examine how collective memory, historical narratives, and perceptions of past injustices shape the dynamics of Christian-Muslim

relations. Through a critical analysis of historical sources, oral traditions, and existing scholarship, this question seeks to illuminate the enduring impact of historical legacies on contemporary religious interactions.

4. **What are the key factors that contribute to - or hinder - peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia?** This research question delves into the underlying factors that shape the dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia. It aims to identify the social, cultural, political, and economic factors that influence interreligious harmony, as well as those that contribute to tensions, conflicts, and divisions.
5. **What are the contemporary manifestations of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia in the public space?** This research question aims to understand the present landscape of Christian-Muslim interactions, exploring the diverse expressions of religious identity, practices, and beliefs within these communities. The question seeks to uncover the complexities, challenges, and opportunities for peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims in contemporary Ethiopian society.
6. **What are the existing interfaith dialogue initiatives and collaborative efforts in Ethiopia, and what is their impact on Christian-Muslim relations?** This research question explores the landscape of interfaith dialogue initiatives, educational programs, and community engagement efforts in Ethiopia. It aims to assess their effectiveness, challenges, and potential for fostering understanding and coexistence; this question seeks to evaluate the impact of interfaith dialogue platforms and collaborative endeavours in promoting peaceful relations between Christians and Muslim.

## Significance of the Study

The relevance of the PhD thesis lies in its ambition to address critical gaps in existing scholarly literature regarding Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia.

While previous standard works, such as those by J. S. Trimingham (1965), E. Cerulli (1971), and J. Cuoq (1981), have predominantly concentrated on historical conflicts between Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia, - where Muslims were reduced to a distracting and troublesome part of Ethiopian history and have been largely ignored<sup>2</sup>, this thesis ventures into uncharted territory. It seeks to rectify the historical imbalance by shifting the focus towards the everyday practices, beliefs, histories, and social roles of the Muslim community in Ethiopia.

The significance of this research is underscored by the fact that, historically, Islam in Ethiopia has often been depicted primarily in the context of conflicts with the Christian Empire. Muslims have been relegated to a peripheral and disruptive role in Ethiopian history, with their multifaceted contributions and experiences marginalized or overlooked. This thesis recognizes the need to correct this historical bias and aims to provide a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics between these religious communities.

By investigating the everyday lives of Muslims in Ethiopia, their religious practices, and their social interactions, this research offers a fresh perspective. It sheds light on the Ethiopian society, where Muslims have played significant roles beyond the scope of historical conflicts. Understanding their contributions to various aspects of Ethiopian life, including culture, economy, and religious coexistence, is essential for a comprehensive grasp of the nation's history and identity.

Furthermore, this thesis is timely in its exploration of the impact of historical events, such as slavery and the slave trade, on Christian-Muslim

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<sup>2</sup> Desplat, P. & Østebø, T. (2016). *Muslim Ethiopia: the Christian legacy identity politics and Islamic reformism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2.

relations in Ethiopia. It not only seeks to uncover the historical foundations of these relations but also to examine how past experiences continue to shape contemporary interactions. This historical context is invaluable for comprehending the present religious landscape in Ethiopia and for informing efforts towards reconciliation, understanding, and peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims.

In summary, my PhD thesis's relevance lies in its commitment to rectifying historical imbalances in the study of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia. By shifting the focus towards the daily lives and experiences of Muslims in the country, as well as examining the enduring impact of historical events, this research contributes significantly to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of Ethiopia's religious and social dynamics. It provides a valuable foundation for future scholarship and practical initiatives aimed at fostering interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence in Ethiopia and beyond.

## Literature review

Modern regional studies were initiated by the late Italian scholar E. Cerulli in the 1920s. Cerulli's extensive body of work on this subject served as a wellspring of inspiration for specialists in Ethiopian history and culture. The following pertains to the most renowned researchers in the Ethiopian field.

**E. Cerulli:** he compiled a series of local histories in Arabic, which he meticulously edited and translated. Among these, the history of the final years of the *Sultanate of Scioa* stands out, shedding light on events preceding the earliest Christian chronicle. Furthermore, he edited fragments of narratives about Ifat, Awsa, and Harar, as well as Harari Arabic materials. His comprehensive examination of the spread of Islam in southwest Ethiopia and his work titled *La lingua e la storia di Harar* along with his translation and edition of the religious manual called *Kitab al Far a'id*, presented valuable insights into the history and language of Harar. However, it's worth noting that his exploration primarily focuses on Harar's connections with the coast, rather than its links with the rest of Muslim Ethiopia. Cerulli's contributions extended to *L'Islam nell'Africa orientale*, which encompassed several sections dedicated to Islamic expansion in the Horn, along with a section discussing Shaykh Husayn, a twelfth-century Muslim mystic. In 1942, he published an article covering the history of Harar from the sixteenth century to the Egyptian conquest, followed by another article on medieval Ethiopia in the subsequent year. In the early 1960s, Cerulli criticized the underrepresentation of Islam in Ethiopian studies, addressing the historical origins of Islam's image as the traditional enemy, its role as a resistance force against the Christian kingdom and the stages and mechanisms of Islam's diffusion in south and south-west Ethiopia. He also contributed a chapter on East Africa to the comprehensive study *Religion in the Middle East*, where he discussed Muslim brotherhoods and the methods of Islamic propagation. His most recent work delved into the history of Islam in Ethiopia concerning the Christian kingdom during the medieval period.

**J. S. Trimingham:** in his work *Islam in Ethiopia*, first published in 1952, he effectively combined Arabic, Ethiopic, and European sources. Within its pages, he explored the introduction and consolidation of Islam in Ethiopia and the Horn, notably as one of the first scholars to examine the subject within a broader geographical context. However, his emphasis primarily centered on the prolonged conflicts between the medieval Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates, with limited discussion of Islam's expansion into central Ethiopia. Notably, Trimingham's characterization of the *Jabarti*, the Ethiopian Muslims of the highlands, as an Islamic diaspora is a point of contention<sup>3</sup>. This portrayal treats indigenous converts in the northern and central regions as if they all originated from a common dispersal center and settled as immigrant populations who brought Islam with them.

**M. Abir:** his work *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes*, delves into the crucial role played by Ethiopian Muslims in the caravan trade during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While it occasionally overemphasizes the influence of ethnic and religious distinctions in the political landscape of the time, it provides valuable insights into the history of Muslim commercial settlements in the hinterland and along the Red Sea coast. Abir's research also sheds light on the rise and development of Oromo kingdoms in southwest Ethiopia and the political history of the north and central regions in the nineteenth century. In a subsequent work on medieval Ethiopia, Abir pays increased attention to the existence and economic significance of Muslim communities in the Ethiopian highlands. He highlights their contributions to the expansion and consolidation of the medieval Ethiopian state, including their roles in administration and foreign missions. However, he appears to overemphasize the eastern Muslim menace that Christian kings had to contend with. Abir attributes a major role in Islam's expansion to a substantial influx of Arab scholars, a perspective that contrasts with available oral traditions and written sources, which emphasize the importance of indigenous scholars in propagating Islam.

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<sup>3</sup> Trimingham, J. S. (1965). *Islam in Ethiopia*. London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 150.

**Father J. Cuoq:** French scholar Cuoq surveyed the history of Islam in the region from the seventh to the sixteenth century in relation to the Christian kingdom. His work made extensive use of Arabic material to shed light on coastal Islam and Ifat. While he detailed medieval conflicts, Father Cuoq, like his predecessors, prominently featured the theme of Christian-Muslim antagonism, portraying Islam as an enduring threat to the Christian polity.

**J. Abbink:** is a distinguished scholar renowned for his extensive work on Ethiopia. With a career dedicated to the rigorous examination of Ethiopian society, politics, and culture, he has made significant contributions to the field of Ethiopian studies. Abbink's research spans a wide range of topics, including Ethiopian politics, history, and anthropology. His insightful analyses have shed light on the complex dynamics of Ethiopian society, providing valuable perspectives for both academics and policymakers. Among his most significant publications *An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics* (1998), *Religion in public spaces: Emerging Muslims-Christian Polemics in Ethiopia* (2011) and *Religion and Violence in the Horn of Africa: Trajectories of Mimetic Rivalry and Escalation between Political Islam and the State* (2020).

**G. Prunier:** he is a distinguished scholar and historian known for his expertise in African studies, particularly focusing on the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia. Prunier has made significant contributions to our understanding of conflicts, politics, and history in the region and his extensive research and writings cover a wide range of topics, including the Rwandan genocide, Eritrea, Sudan, and the complex dynamics of the Horn of Africa.

**É. Ficquet:** he is a prominent scholar and historian with a specialization in the history and cultures of the Horn of Africa. His research interests encompass a diverse array of subjects, including Ethiopian history, religious traditions, and the cultural interactions of the region. He published with G. Prunier the book *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi* in 2015.



## Methodological introduction

The methodology employed in my PhD thesis is characterized by a multifaceted approach <sup>4</sup>, integrating various research techniques and tools to ensure a comprehensive and rigorous analysis. In relation to the research synthesis, primary importance was given to the methodology of digital history that I chose to adopt during their doctoral phase.

Regarding the examination of admissible sources, Chabod's elucidation of the so-called "canonical sources", which he divided into written, visual, and oral in the 1950s, serves as a foundational framework. However, when it comes to Africa and slavery, historians are called upon to employ their research tools and translate them to the reader, moving from an argumentative isolation, almost *in vitro*, to the creation of a flow of knowledge from the laboratory of history to curiosity. Therefore, the decision was made to embrace new concepts and different signs, evaluating not only immaterial sources, which Luzzato would say enrich the ethics of a narrative, but also virtual ones, explicitly referring to the so-called "digital history". Nowadays, sources of contemporary history and the rich colonial cartography are almost always accessible online.

In the exploration of sources, particularly in the context of Africa and slavery, historians face the challenge of adapting research methodologies to convey their findings effectively. This transition involves moving from a state of isolated argumentation to a more accessible dissemination of historical knowledge. Consequently, the incorporation of not only novel concepts and varied sources but also virtual resources, characteristic of digital history, becomes paramount. Presently, sources related to contemporary history and comprehensive colonial cartography are readily accessible online.

This digital landscape enables extensive research and alternative pathways of exploration. The so-called "distant reading approach" empowers researchers to access numerous sources without relying on document delivery services. It's

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<sup>4</sup> See *appendix*.

a qualitative method supported by a mechanical system that facilitates the analysis of not only individual texts but also extensive *corpora*.

In contrast, the “close reading” allows for focused examination of specific topics, often presented algorithmically based on research parameters. The methodology integrates advanced research techniques, harnessing the power of digital resources such as online catalogues, databases, and programming languages like Python to facilitate the retrieval of bibliographic data. This approach significantly enhances the efficiency of both data collection and analysis; various tools and platforms such as OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue), Summon, Yewno, Google Scholar, Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and citation databases played crucial roles. Bibliographic management was effectively accomplished through the utilization of RefWorks, an online service dedicated to managing bibliographic citation data and automating bibliography creation within a personalized bibliographic database, contingent upon creating a personal account. RefWorks offers the capability to save RSS feeds to any personal email and employs the Write-N-Cite feature for downloadable support. This phase was followed by textual analysis on JSTOR, a process known as “information retrieval”.

The concept of constructing a digital historical archive aimed at systematically archiving historical sources in the Internet Archive, employing tools like the way-back machine, presents an intriguing opportunity. This endeavour can contribute significantly to the “historicization of the web”, providing a new and alternative approach for 2.0 society members and digital humanities enthusiasts to conduct research. Joining platforms like Academia and ResearchGate provided access to diverse user profiles and fostered connections with fellow knowledge creators.

Fieldwork missions constitute a fundamental aspect of the research methodology, serving as a means to acquire firsthand knowledge of the populations and regions pertinent to my study. The traditional approach involves full immersion within the local context, active engagement with communities, and the tapping into oral traditions and local expertise to augment and enhance the analytical framework.

However, owing to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the PhD candidate, regrettably, found himself unable to conduct on-site fieldwork.

## Organization of the Thesis

In this PhD thesis, the exploration begins with a chapter related to a careful examination of religious dynamics in contemporary Ethiopia. Within this chapter, a comparative analysis of Christianity and Islam is undertaken, addressing their coexistence within the region. Subsections within the first chapter, designated as 1.1 and 1.2, respectively, delve into the initial steps toward coexistence at contemporary pilgrimage centers and explore the political and religious dynamics spanning from the late 19th century to the 1930 Imperial Era, with a particular emphasis on the interplay between national unity and collective identity.

Chapter 2 delves into the historical context of caravan routes and slave markets in Ethiopia at the turn of the 20th century. The subsections, 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3, dissect this intricate historical landscape, addressing the routes and markets associated with the slave trade during this era. Furthermore, a critical examination of the role of religion in the slave trade is conducted, with a particular focus on the Kebra Negast<sup>5</sup> code. Additionally, an analysis of the enduring impact of slavery and the post-slavery period on Christian-Muslim relations is presented, highlighting the role of leaders in promoting contemporary coexistence.

Chapter 3 explores the multifaceted aspects of religious identities and coexistence within the Ethiopian context. Subsections 3.1 and 3.2 systematically unravel the historical developments and contemporary dynamics of Christian and Muslim identities in Ethiopia. Constitutional amendments, reforms, and the public space are examined. Furthermore, factors influencing interreligious coexistence are investigated, and potential challenges on the horizon are delineated.

The concluding chapter sum up the essence of the findings, provides critical reflections on the contributions to the scholarly field, and suggests avenues for future research inquiries.

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<sup>5</sup> See *glossary*.

Finally, a comprehensive glossary is provided to ensure clarity in terminology, and it is followed by an extensive APA style bibliography that anchors this narrative in the existing body of knowledge. Secondary sources include monographic texts, journal articles, monographic studies and periodicals. Additional resources such as websites and conferences have been included. Visual aids, represented as cartography and figures, supplement the scholarly discourse, enhancing the comprehension of key insights within this academic exploration.

## **Note on transcriptions and transliterations**

Names and toponyms in Amharic are simplified, with no diacritics, and are from the consulted available sources; common Amharic words has been rendered in their Anglicized form, without diacritics. In order to ensure uniformity within the text, the nomenclature of place names and personalities has been standardized.

## **Acronyms**

AFCC: Armed Forces Coordinating Committee  
AICP: Association of Islamic Charitable Projects  
ASWJ: Ahl al-Sunna wal Jama'a  
COPWE: Organization of the Ethiopian Workers' Party  
CSA: Central Statistical Agency  
EIASC: Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council  
ELM: Eritrean Liberation Movement  
ENDF: Ethiopian National Defense Forces  
EOC: Ethiopian Orthodox (Tewahedo) Church  
EOTC: Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church  
EOTC: Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church  
EPLF: Eritrean People's Liberation Front  
EPRDF: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front  
EPRP: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party  
FDRE: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia  
FGS: Federal Government of Somalia  
ICU: Islamic Courts Union  
IFLO: Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia  
IGAD: Intergovernmental Authority on Development  
IUC: Islamic Courts Union  
NCOs: Non-Commissioned Officers  
OAU: Organization of African Unity  
OLA: Oromo Liberation Army  
OLF: Oromo Liberation Front  
ONLF: Ogaden National Liberation Front  
PDRE: Democratic People's Republic of Ethiopia  
PFDJ: People's Front for Democracy and Justice  
PGE: Provisional Government of Eritrea

PMAC: Provisional Military Administrative Council

PMAC: Provisional Military Administrative Council

SNNP: Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region

TDF: Tigray Defense Forces

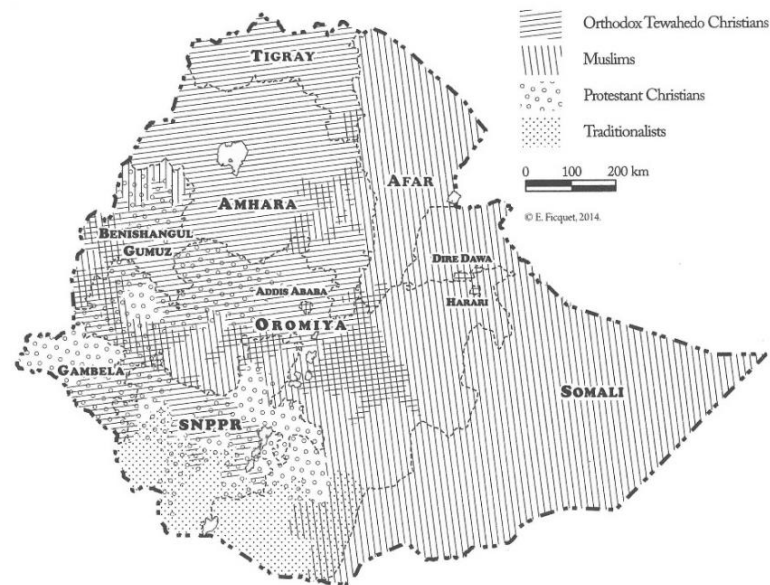
TFG: Transitional Federal Government

TLF: Tigray Liberation Front

TPLF: Tigray People's Liberation Front

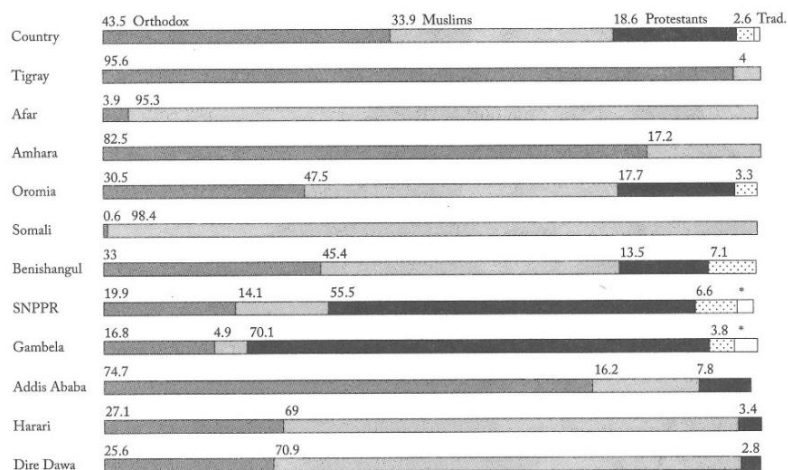


# Chapter 1 - Religious Dynamics in Contemporary Ethiopia: Comparative Study of Christianity and Islam



Source: Central Statistical Authority, Population and Housing Census, 2007.

Note on the making of the map: Religious groups are outlined when their followers represent more than 20% of the population at the level of *woreda* district. This allows for the representation of areas of religious coexistence.



\* Catholics: Country total: 0,8% - SNNPR: 2,4% - Gambela: 3,4%

Figure 1.1 – Ethiopia - religions

Throughout centuries, Islam has been taught, practiced, and subject to debate within the geographical confines that now constitute the modern state of Ethiopia. The proximity of Arab countries played a key role in facilitating the early diffusion of Islam into Ethiopia and sustained a continuous exchange of innovative ideas from the broader international Islamic community <sup>6</sup>. However, this geographical explanation only partially elucidates the appeal of Islam within the Ethiopian context. As reported Trimingham in 1969:

Islam in the region is not significant in itself but only in relation to the history of the Christian state in northern Ethiopia. <sup>7</sup>

Among the myriad factors at play, two stand out: first, the core principles of Islam inherently regard all human beings who share a reverence for and acceptance of the supreme authority of Allah as equals, transcending cultural divisions and obviating the need for a clerical hierarchy that holds sway over the rest of society. Secondly, Arabic, as a conduit for Islamic teachings, affords access to a written language that facilitates international communication. Through its egalitarian and intercultural values, Islam contributed significantly to dismantling barriers among societies in the northeast African region. It fostered connections among these societies, establishing trans-regional networks that facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and people. While it did not eradicate the underlying sources of local conflicts, Islam generally elevated the

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<sup>6</sup> Ficquet, É. (2015). *The Ethiopian Muslims: historical processes and ongoing controversies*. in Prunier, G. & Ficquet, É. (2015). *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*. C. Hurst & Co, 95-97.

<sup>7</sup> Kritzcek, J. and Lewis, W. H. (eds.). (1969) *Islam in Africa*. New-York, Van Nostrand-Reinhold, 21.

priority of maintaining peaceful interactions among Muslim groups, irrespective of their cultural distinctions, thereby promoting a spirit of coexistence.

The persistent issue of Muslim participation in the formation of Ethiopian nationhood and the associated challenge of maintaining coexistence and mutual tolerance among religious groups have deep historical roots.

The oversight of Islam in Ethiopian studies and the imperative for a comprehensive examination of the dynamics of Islam within Ethiopia have already been underscored by a new generation of scholars. Despite these efforts, there persists a steadfast notion that the history of Islam can be distilled into a narrative of perpetual and inevitable conflicts between the Christian communities in the highlands and the Muslim populations in the lowlands, a notion still regarded as established wisdom. This theme permeates much of the recent historiography, portraying Islam as an enduring threat to the Ethiopian state's survival and even to the Ethiopian national identity itself.

However, it is increasingly evident that positive interactions between Muslim and Christian Ethiopians may have held far greater significance than conflicts. Contrary to the assertions of many writers, Islam cannot be viewed as an external historical force in Ethiopia. Throughout the protracted period spanning from the decline of Aksum to the present day, Islam has constituted an integral component of Ethiopian culture<sup>8</sup>.

Dating back to perhaps the tenth century, independent Muslim polities existed alongside the Christian kingdom in the north-western Ethiopian highlands. While trade relations facilitated mutual recognition, competition and mistrust occasionally gave rise to conflicts between these Muslim powers and the Christian kingdom. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, an imperial state emerged, primarily founded on Christian allegiance. This transformation forcefully integrated Muslim subjects into the new territorial structure of the Ethiopian state, resulting in discrimination and marginalization.

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<sup>8</sup> Ahmed, H. (1992). The historiography of Islam in Ethiopia. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 3(1), 18.

Following the 1974 revolution and the end of imperial rule, authorities pursued more secular orientations. Gradually, Muslims have gained recognition as having equal rights within their communities and beyond, pushing back against government interference and dispelling suspicions that they might serve as conduits for external threats emanating from the broader Islamic world. This historical backdrop underscores the complex dynamics surrounding religious diversity and coexistence in Ethiopia.

The historical context of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia is essential to understand the complexities of their present interactions. The religious factor has played a key role in defining the dynamics between Christians and Muslims in contemporary Ethiopia, influencing connections from the era of slavery and slave trade to the present human coexistence.

Ethiopia's religious landscape is currently diverse, with Christianity and Islam being the two major faith traditions practiced by its population. The most recent census, conducted in 2007 by the U.S. government<sup>9</sup>, estimated 44 percent of the population adheres to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), 34 percent are Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent belong to Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups (United States Department of State, 2019)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> United States Department of State - Office of International Religious Freedom, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2019*, February 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Flemmen, A. B., & Zenebe, M. (2016). "Religious "Mahbär" in Ethiopia: Ritual Elements, Dynamics, and Challenges". *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 46(1), 5. « [...] as recorded in the national census from 1984 to the most recent one in 2007, we see a clear pattern of the Orthodox Täwahido Church losing terrain, particularly in relation to Protestants. A decline is clearly evident, from 54 percent Orthodox Christians in 1984 to 43.5 percent in 2007. While the share of Muslims remains constant with a change from 32.9 in 1984 to 33.9 percent in 2007, the number of Protestants has increased from 5.48 percent in 1974 to 18.5 percent in 2007 (CSA 2011). [...] Abbink (2003) identifies the more-competitive religious environment as a result of "transnational" religious challenges. Externally supported missionary educational institutions as well as Islamic movements and groups financed from the outside will have consequences [...]».

In Ethiopia's last census (2007), approximately 62 percent of the population was counted as Christian, 34 percent as Muslim, and the remainder as of traditional faiths. The Muslims are Sunni, but with a growing number of Wahhabist-Salafist <sup>11</sup> persuasion (an estimated 15 percent, not registered as such in the census data). Within the Christian part of the population there is also a shift from Orthodox (now 43.5 percent of the Ethiopian population, a decrease compared to the 1994 census), to Evangelicalism-Pentecostalism (now 18.6 percent). Compared to 1994, Muslims increased by 1.1 percent to a total of 33.9 percent. <sup>12</sup>

As shown in the previous map, areas of religious coexistence become visible after representing those religious groups whose followers constitute approximately 20 percent of the population in each *woreda* <sup>13</sup> district.

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<sup>11</sup> This study does not focus on Wahhabism and does not intend to delve into its form. It solely seeks to examine the relationship of Wahhabism with the creation, or lack thereof, of peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims. If you wish to delve deeper into this topic, the recommended bibliography is as follows: DeLong-Bas, N. (2004). *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*. London: Tauris; Kaba, M., & Erlich, H. (2006). Al-Ahbash and Wahhabiyya: Interpretations of Islam. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 38(4), 519-538; Krämer, G. (2000). On Difference and Understanding: The Use and Abuse of the Study of Islam. *ISIM Newsletter*, 5, 6-7; Watenpaugh, K. D. (2013). *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. Furthermore, reference is made to the works of Michele Brignone, the scientific secretary of the Oasis International Foundation and the chief editor of the eponymous journal. His research focuses particularly on contemporary Islamic societies and Islamic political thought.

<sup>12</sup> Abbink, J. (2011). Religion in public spaces: emerging Muslim-Christian polemics in Ethiopia. *African Affairs*, 110(439), 256-257.

<sup>13</sup> See *glossary*.

Christianity, specifically the Ethiopian Orthodox <sup>14</sup> Tewahedo Church<sup>15</sup>, has deep historical roots in the country, tracing its origins back to the early centuries of the Common Era. The church is known by its name *Tewahedo*, or “oneness”. For most of its history the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church has been isolated from mainstream Christianity in Europe. First, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches rejected the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church’s theology at the Council of Chalce in 451 A.D. Second, it was separated from Europe politically and geographically by the Muslim conquests in North Africa in the seventh and eighth century. This resulted in the development of unique practices and rituals, and in possessing a biblical canon that differs from that of both Catholic and Protestant churches<sup>16</sup>. Orthodox Christianity and the Ethiopian state have been intimately accompanied politically for millennia. According to Ethiopian tradition, Christianity first came to the Aksum Empire in the fourth century A.D. when a Greek-speaking missionary named Frumentius converted King Ezana <sup>17</sup>. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church of Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century had a crucial role in unifying the kingdom and its outlying regions under a rejuvenated Christian identity.

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<sup>14</sup> Within Orthodox Christianity, bishops are esteemed as the direct successors of the Apostles, bearing the responsibility originally conferred by Christ during the establishment of the Church. Orthodox adherents thus harken back to the early Church and its pristine Christian faith, firmly rooted in sacred tradition. This tradition encompasses the Holy Scriptures, the teachings passed down by the Church Fathers, and the dogmatic principles developed during the seven significant ecumenical councils. Additionally, Orthodox Christians uphold the validity of the Seven Sacraments and demonstrate profound devotion to the Virgin Mary, reverently titled Theotókos, as the Mother of God. Moreover, they hold deep reverence for the Saints. In terms of the doctrine of Original Sin, known as Ancestral Sin within Orthodoxy, it does not find a place in their theological framework. According to their belief, individuals are born in a state of purity, untouched by the sin attributed to Adam and Eve.

<sup>15</sup> *See glossary.*

<sup>16</sup> Flemmen, A. B., & Zenebe, M., cit., 6. When a church is threatened, a general understanding is that it to harden its patterns in an effort to maintain its identity and seeks to emphasize its distinctive forms, rituals, and dogma. According to Berhanu (2000) principle applies especially to the Ethiopian.

<sup>17</sup> Schuster, A. M. H. (1994). “Hidden Sanctuaries of Ethiopia”. *Archaeology*, 47(1), 28–35.

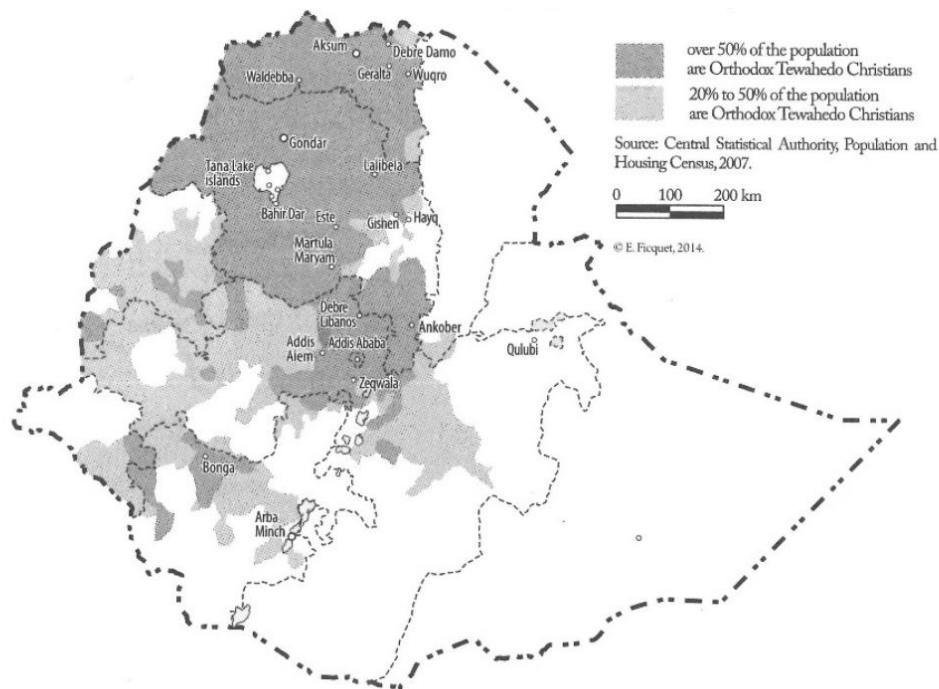


Figure 1.2 – Orthodox Tewahedo Christians and their major places of worship

However, it swiftly became apparent that in order to sustain this role, significant organizational reforms within the clergy and the Church’s subordination to secular political authority were imperative. Consequently, the primary challenge confronting the Ethiopian Church in the first half of the twentieth century was its nationalization. Following its detachment from the Egyptian Coptic<sup>18</sup> Church, the Ethiopian Church was compelled to adapt to the evolving political landscape in Ethiopia<sup>19</sup>. Subsequently, the EPRDF administration took action against the Derg’s Patriarch, who fled into exile, and installed a new leader with shared origins with the secular leadership. This recurrent government intervention in ecclesiastical affairs instigated the

<sup>18</sup> It refers to anything that belongs to or relates to a part of the Christian Church that originated in Egypt.

<sup>19</sup> The Derg regime, for instance, detained and executed a Patriarch, appointing a new ecclesiastical leadership that aligned with revolutionary ideals.

emergence of reformist movements that provided a refuge for conservative opposition groups. Presently, Orthodox Christians constitute approximately half of Ethiopia's population, with a notable concentration in the northwest region and is the largest and oldest Christian denomination in Ethiopia, with a membership of 32 to 36 million.

In addition to the interactions and dialogues between the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox and Islamic communities, the influence of foreign Christian missionary movements has played a significant role in shaping Ethiopian history. During the seventeenth century, Jesuit Catholic missions achieved the conversion of the Ethiopian king to Roman Catholicism, sparking a civil conflict that ultimately led to the kingdom's isolation and internal theological disputes within the Orthodox Church. Subsequently, there was a gradual relaxation of restrictions on missionary activities during the nineteenth century. The presence and actions of missionaries were tolerated as long as they confined their efforts to proselytizing among peripheral populations. While Catholic missions maintained a discreet presence, primarily offering assistance to vulnerable communities, Protestant churches pursued more assertive development agendas. They fostered movements advocating for political emancipation by promoting the use of local languages and the assertion of more autonomous cultural identities. This proactive stance led to persecution of Protestant denominations under the Derg regime.

Presently, Ethiopian Protestants account for nearly 20 percent of the population, constituting the majority in certain southwestern regions. Ethiopia with its long and deep Christian legacy, famously called a "Christian Island in a sea of Muslims"<sup>20</sup>, represents a revealing case of how such simplistic thinking about Islam have been assumed in the present to be peaceful and tolerant, mutually coexisting with the non-Muslim neighbours.

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<sup>20</sup> Desplat, & Østebø, T., cit., 5. « [...] a term applied by the Ethiopian emperor Menelik II in letters to European rulers in April 1981, and later popularized by various Ethiopian leaders [...]. Used by Menelik when asking for help and support in local conflicts [...]. »



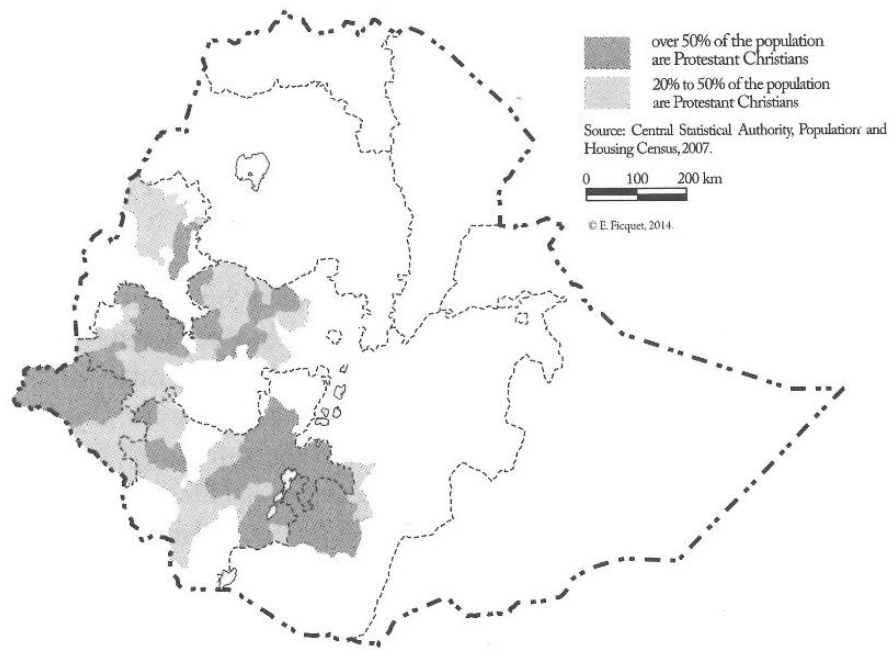


Figure 1.3 - Ethiopia – Protestant Christians

Islam on the other hand, was introduced to Ethiopia in the early seventh century, establishing its presence and growing alongside Christianity. From its very inception, Islam has been a trans-continental religion, in this case helped by the proximity of the African Red Sea Coast to the Arabian heartland where it first emerged. In fact the first believers converted to the new religion - outside the close circle of the Prophet Muhammad - are assumed to have been Ethiopians.

In the realm of Islam, Sunni Islam constitutes one of the two principal branches, with the majority of the religion's adherents aligning themselves with this tradition. Sunni Muslims perceive their denomination as the orthodox and traditionalist manifestation of Islam, distinct from the minority denomination, Shi'ah. Sunnis acknowledge the first four caliphs as the legitimate successors to the Prophet Muhammad, while the Shi'ah contend that leadership within Islam

exclusively belonged to Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali, and his descendants. Sunnis have historically conceptualized the political establishment created by Muhammad in Medina as a terrestrial, temporal dominion. Consequently, they have considered Islamic leadership as a product of prevailing political realities in the Muslim world rather than a divine order or inspiration. This perspective led to the Sunni acceptance of the leadership of prominent Meccan families and even foreign caliphs, as long as their rule facilitated the proper practice of religion and the maintenance of order. A significant portion of Sunni jurists formulated the viewpoint that the caliph must hail from Muhammad's tribe, the Quraysh, yet devised an election theory adaptable enough to accommodate allegiance to the de facto caliph, regardless of his origins. These distinctions between the Sunni tradition and other factions regarding the possession of spiritual and political authority persisted even after the decline of the caliphate as an effective political institution in the 13th century. Sunni orthodoxy is characterized by its emphasis on the beliefs and customs of the majority of the community, as opposed to peripheral groups. The concept of consensus that evolved among Sunnis allowed them to incorporate various customs and practices that developed over time but lacked roots in the Haile.

Salafism, on the other hand, represents an ultra-orthodox and fundamentalist current within Islam that emerged in the late 19th century, stemming from the reflections of influential theologians and thinkers such as Muhammad Rida, Muhammad Abduh, and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. It serves as the underlying ideology for numerous Islamist political parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and arose within the intellectual context of cultivating Islamic pride and identity as a means to resist European colonialism in North Africa and the Middle East. Wahhabism, conversely, constitutes an unorthodox version of Islam often characterized as the most conservative, puritanical, and anti-modern strain.

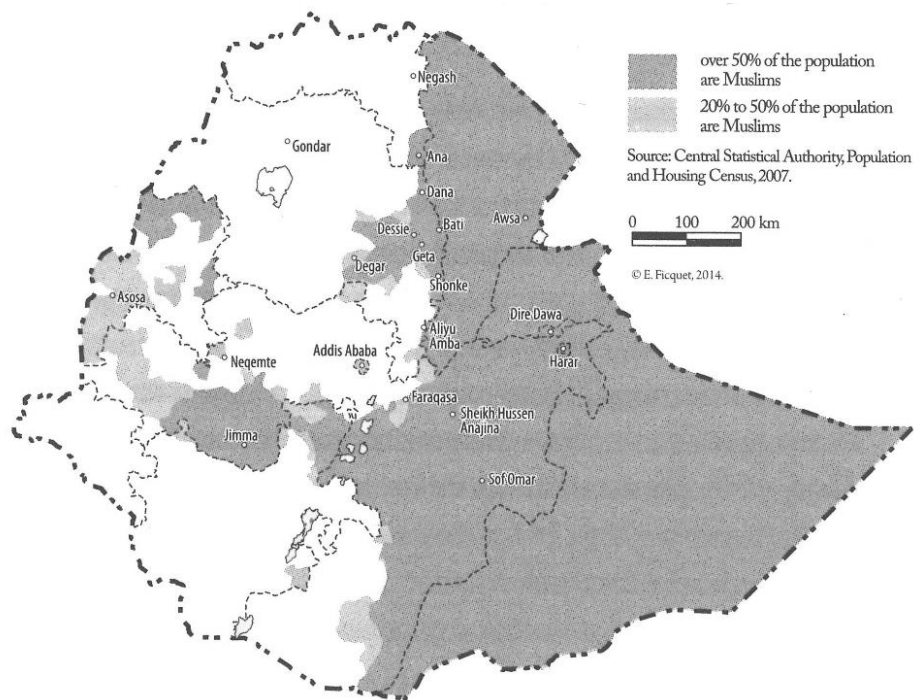


Figure 1.4 – Ethiopia – Muslims and their major places of worship

In the year 615, so tradition goes, the first *hijra*<sup>21</sup> occurred: a group of Arab followers of Islam in danger of persecution by the dominant Quraysh authorities in Mecca were advised by Muhammad himself to seek refuge across the sea, in the empire of Aksum, where a benevolent king would give them protections<sup>22</sup>. These refugees, so-called *sababa*<sup>23</sup>, the Muhammad's first followers, were indeed well-received in Aksum and could practise their faith

<sup>21</sup> See glossary.

<sup>22</sup> Feyissa, D. (2016). *Muslims struggling for recognition in contemporary Ethiopia* in Desplat & Østebø T. (2016). *Muslim Ethiopia: the Christian legacy identity politics and Islamic reformism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 25.

<sup>23</sup> Desplat, & Østebø, T., cit., 27.

freely <sup>24</sup>. Requests from the Meccan authorities to deliver them back were refused. The tolerant attitude of the Ethiopians gave rise to a whole new genre of Arab literature extolling the virtues of “the Ethiopians”. The practical effect was that on the authority of the Prophet himself Ethiopia was not to be seen as a target for *jihad*. Undoubtedly, there is an economic aspect to the story, and it is crucial to emphasize the subsequent economic system revolving around the trade routes of slavery: Aksum was in decline, and the trade from and to the empire was not as attractive as that in the Middle East, to which the attention of the Islamic conquerors was directed.

In the decades following the death of Muhammad, however, there were various armed clashes between Ethiopians and Arabians and raids by both sides, also related to the control of the Red Sea trade. Aksum, however, represents the first example of religious coexistence, as reported by Husayn Ahmed:

[...] Aksum possesses the unique distinction of being at once the cradle of both Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia, and represents perhaps the earliest example of a geographical setting favourable for a peaceful encounter and harmonious coexistence between two great monotheistic religions: Christianity and Islam <sup>25</sup>.

From the ninth century, the Makzumite dynasty founded a sultanate in central Ethiopia and soon afterwards other Muslim principalities were established. The new faith did not, however, attract many followers in Ethiopia, certainly not in the highland Christian areas. Islam expansion was very gradual and took place in the lowland coastal areas inhabited by pastoral nomads,

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<sup>24</sup> Cuoq, J. (1981). *L'Islam en Éthiopie : des origines au XVIe siècle*. Paris : Nouvelles Editions Latinea.

<sup>25</sup> Ahmed, H. (1996). Aksum In Muslim Historical Traditions. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 29(2), 48.

spreading later<sup>26</sup> in the eleventh-twelfth century to the Somali areas in the south-east.

It was not until the 16th century that Islam was able to assert itself, when the Muslim leader Imam Ahmad bin Ibrahim succeeded in uniting the different factions into the military force of the Sultanate of Adal, which moved against the Christian empire. Imam Ahmed managed to control three quarters of the Christian empire for a good fourteen years, until he was defeated. This event is noteworthy because it led not only to Islam being seen as an external threat<sup>27</sup> but also to doubts as to whom the Ethiopian Muslims were reserving their faith for.

The primary foundation for the perspective articulated by Ullendorff and Trimingham concerning Islam in Ethiopia hinges on the conventional differentiation they, along with numerous other scholars, have traditionally made between what they designate as “historic Abyssinia”, characterized by its Semitic and Christian attributes, and Ethiopia, a broader political and geographical entity that evolved later in history. However, it is crucial to recognize that, despite the prevalence of Christianity as a state religion and the dominance of the Semitic-speaking community within a lengthy, narrow corridor stretching from the north to the central highlands, Abyssinia has historically been a diverse society encompassing non-Semitic pagan and Muslim components that hold equal historical significance; by the tenth century numerous Muslim communities had established themselves in the principal trading hubs of northern and central Ethiopia. Moreover, the territorial expansion of the Christian kingdom did not invariably lead to an immediate expansion of the Christian church or the widespread adoption of Christianity by the indigenous populations. Instead, this transformation occurred following an extended and arduous process of evangelization. In fact, the period characterized by the definitive consolidation of Christianity in Abyssinia commenced in the late thirteenth and fourteenth

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<sup>26</sup> Abbink, J. (1998). An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11, 111.

<sup>27</sup> Erlich, H. (1994). *Ethiopia and the Middle East*. Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner.

centuries. By this time, Islam had already established a significant presence in the region <sup>28</sup>.

Over the centuries, these two religions have interacted, sometimes harmoniously and at other times in conflict, influencing the socio-cultural, economic, and political aspects of Ethiopian society. This perception of the relation between Muslims and Christians is still nowadays described by someone as consensual, peaceful and tolerant but by some others as violent, conflictual and intolerant <sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Ahmed, H. (1992). The historiography of Islam in Ethiopia. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 3(1), 16.

<sup>29</sup> Ahmed, H. (2006). Coexistence and/or Confrontation?: Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 36(1), 4-22.

## 1.1 Exploring Contemporary Pilgrimage Centers: Pioneering Steps Towards Coexistence

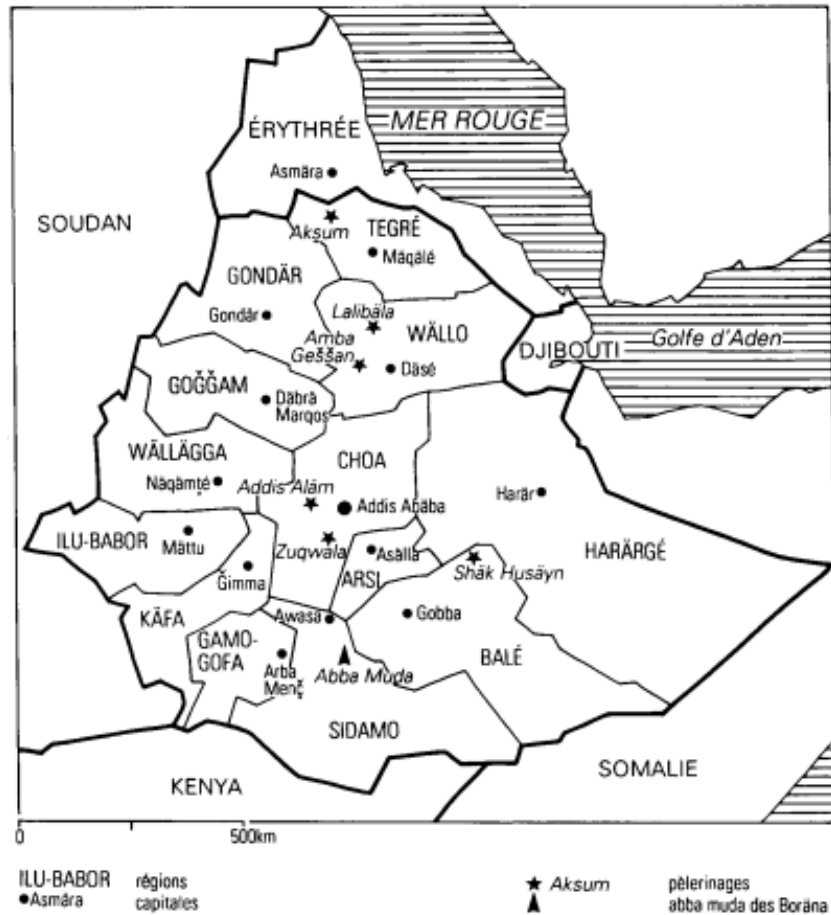


Fig. 1.5 – Principaux lieux de pèlerinage en Éthiopie

In Ethiopia, pilgrimage is a widespread practice in almost all societies<sup>30</sup>. It takes place along religious routes that cross the territory to reach the most remote places.

<sup>30</sup> Levine, D. N. (1974). *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 91.

Les pèlerinages locaux, régionaux et nationaux sont incontestablement des rites inscrits dans les progrès du christianisme et de l'islam autochtones <sup>31</sup>.

The initial recorded instances of pilgrimages pertain to Christian pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem and to sacred sites within Ethiopia itself. By comparison, the internal pilgrimages within Ethiopia, though documented sources about them are scarce, exhibit a distinctly divergent ambit. These internal pilgrimages manifest the yearning to establish an indigenous sacred geography unique to Ethiopia, with one salient facet being the emulation of the Holy Places of both the ancient and new covenant within the territorial expanse. A notable exemplification of this phenomenon is observed in the Lalibela complex, which has evolved over the centuries into an authentic representation of the “Celestial Jerusalem”. Considering the acknowledged peril of the pilgrim route to Jerusalem passing through Egypt, it is plausible that the Ethiopian region may yet harbour, and has preserved across epochs, cherished Christian relics and vestiges <sup>32</sup>. In addition to this sacred geography that designates Ethiopia as the *verus Israel* <sup>33</sup> but is applicable to only a select few remarkably esteemed sites, another, considerably more significant phenomenon demands attention: the presence of locations that bear the imprints of Ethiopian saints’ activities and

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<sup>31</sup> Gascon, A. & Hirsch, B. (1992). Les espaces sacrés comme lieux de confluence religieuse en Éthiopie (Shrines Where Religions Meet in Ethiopia). *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 32(128), 699. (transl.). «Local, regional, and national pilgrimages are undeniably rituals embedded in the evolution of indigenous Christianity and Islam».

<sup>32</sup> *Ibi*, 692. «Il est possible en conséquence que le thème du pèlerinage empêche, à cause des dangers de la route, soit également l'expression de cette conception faisant de l'espace de l'Éthiopie chrétienne le réceptacle de lieux aussi sacrés que ceux de Palestine». (transl.). «Therefore, it is possible that the theme of pilgrimage, due to the dangers of the journey, also hinders the expression of this belief, which regards the space of Christian Ethiopia as a receptacle for places as sacred as those in Palestine».

<sup>33</sup>*Ibidem*.



subsequently attract numerous local or regional pilgrimages, also known as “popular pilgrimages”<sup>34</sup>, frequently imbued with thaumaturgical significance.

While pilgrimage sites have evolved in their societal characteristics, they typically draw the interest of a single ethnic community and are integral to what is described as the concept of “sacred topography”<sup>35</sup>.

In Ethiopia, the pilgrimage to Abba Muda<sup>36</sup> by the Oromo tribe has always been a clear example, where only a member of the tribe could go, excluding slaves and Amharic-speaking Oromo. But during the 19th century, the association of the place of worship with that of Shaykh Husayn, a Muslim, began to create mixed pilgrimage routes.

What makes pilgrimage in Ethiopia unique is its trans-religious character, as along these routes, both Christian and Muslim believers can be found participating in the long processions<sup>37</sup>, sometimes out of mere curiosity.

The fundamental difference between pilgrimage centers lies mainly in their architectural typology: Christian centers are generally built around a church, while Muslim centers are constructed near places and sanctuaries that commemorate the lives and pious deeds of distinguished individuals. And since devout Muslim individuals tend to migrate and establish new religious centers, these centers often become sanctified. Once these individuals pass away, their

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<sup>34</sup>*Ibi*, 692. «L’histoire de ces pèlerinages populaires, vers les monastères, les tombeaux des saints et les églises qui constituent la géographie sacrée propre à l’Éthiopie [...]». (transl.) «The history of these popular pilgrimages to the monasteries, tombs of saints, and churches that comprise the sacred geography specific to Ethiopia...».

<sup>35</sup>Lewis, I. (1968). Authority and Change: A Study of the Kallu Institution among the Macha Galla of Ethiopia. By Karl Eric Knutsson. Göteborg: Etnografiska Museet, Etnologiska Studier 29, 1967. P239. 30 «Kroner. *Africa*, 38(3), 352-353. «[...] ces cérémonies se déroulent dans un lieu qui appartient à leur “topographie sacrée” ». (transl.) «These ceremonies take place in a location that belongs to their “sacred topography”».

<sup>36</sup>Geda, G. J. & Flakerud, I. (2007). *The Faraqasa indigenous pilgrimage center: history and ritual practices*. Norway: University of Tromso, 24.

<sup>37</sup> Levine, D. N., cit., 92.

descendants or followers play a fundamental role as “guardians or mediators”<sup>38</sup> in the formation and maintenance of these centers, precisely as sacred sites.

Regarding Christian pilgrimage, can be certainly found the Church of St. Gabriel in Qulubi, the Church of Tsion Mariam in Axum, the Church of St. George in Lalibela, and the Monastery of St. Mary in Gishen. Qulubi is one such case: when columns of Christian pilgrims form, it is common to encounter Muslims chewing *khat*<sup>39</sup> and supplicating God in their famous *dua*<sup>40</sup>. The supplications, *dua*, are performed during the *hadras* or *wadajas*, which are regular collective Muslim rituals conducted to seek the intercession of spirits or holy individuals<sup>41</sup>.

As Muslim places, the sanctuaries of Anajina and Dirre Shaykh Husayn in Bale, southern Ethiopia, the sanctuary of Ya’a in western Ethiopia, the sanctuary of Alkaso in Silte, central Ethiopia, and finally, the sanctuary of Sayyd Bushra in Gata, northeastern Ethiopia, in Wollo.

The peculiarity of these pilgrimage centers is their trans-religious nature: since the pilgrimage routes are porous, these centers become meeting points as

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<sup>38</sup> Ishihara, M. (2016). *The formation of trans-religious pilgrimage centers in Southeast Ethiopia: Sitti Mumina and the Faraqasa connection* in Desplat & Østebø T. (2016). *Muslim Ethiopia: the Christian legacy identity politics and Islamic reformism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 93

<sup>39</sup> Khat, also spelled as “qat” or “chat” refers to a psychoactive plant native to the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, including Ethiopia. It is known scientifically as *Catha edulis*. The leaves and young shoots of the khat plant contain stimulant compounds, primarily cathinone and cathine, which produce a stimulating effect when chewed or consumed. In Ethiopia, khat has been traditionally used for centuries, both recreationally and in social contexts. It is often chewed for its stimulating properties, which can result in increased alertness, energy, and a sense of euphoria. However, the use of khat is a subject of debate due to its potential health and social implications. Some countries have banned or regulated its use, while others permit its consumption.

<sup>40</sup> Pankhurst, A. (1994). *Reflections on Pilgrimages in Ethiopia* in Marcus H. and Hudson G. (1994). *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies: Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*. Lawrenceville, New Jersey: Red Sea Press.

<sup>41</sup> Hussein, A. (2010), *Tradition and Innovation in the Ritual of Khat Consumption in Wollo, Northern Ethiopia* in Gebissa, E. (2010). *Khat in Ethiopia*. Trenton, New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, 13-27.

well as places of coexistence of religious practices. Pilgrimage places in Ethiopia are well-defined by Pankhurst as follows:

[...] meeting places for people coming from various localities and ethnic groups, are conceived of as typical places where boundaries, ethnic, political, or religious, may be transcended .<sup>42</sup>

Donald Levine investigated the motivation behind pilgrimages in Ethiopia. Initially, he reminds us that “the very inclination to go on pilgrimage is a notable pan-Ethiopian trait”, as if the territory itself were conducive to some form of religious coexistence and shared participation. Secondly, pilgrimages can be trans-religious: although Islam and Christianity in Ethiopia have been highly syncretistic <sup>43</sup>, their followers have found a common public space in joint participation and observance of shared religious rituals. Finally, pilgrimages can also unite people from different ethnic backgrounds <sup>44</sup>.

Abbink’s analysis presents a compelling argument for drawing comparisons between Sufi centers and shrines or monasteries. The core rationale behind this assertion lies in the predominant spiritual attributes exhibited by these establishments. These centers function as consistent focal points for various activities, including education, prayer, devotion, healing, and religious or mystical experiences. Within their confines, inhabitants lead lives of modesty and celibacy, serving as exemplars for others. Importantly, these centers are devoid of any political, administrative, or military functions, setting them apart from many historical forms of Muslim retreats. This distinctiveness aligns them, albeit

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<sup>42</sup> Pankhurst, A., cit., p933-53.

<sup>43</sup> Look subsequently at the reference in the text.

<sup>44</sup> Levine, D. N. (1974). *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 44-50.

partially, with the broader religious culture prevalent in Ethiopia. This cultural framework is characterized by a communal adherence to a theistic worldview and a profound commitment to values centered around the destiny and fate of humanity. In-depth scrutiny of life within these centers and the life trajectories of their residents serves to reinforce this common religious thread. This shared element of religiosity is the result of enduring mutual influences and interactions, extending its reach across various religious traditions, encompassing Christian, Muslim, and traditional belief systems. Significantly, even within traditional Ethiopian religions, there is an acknowledgment of a paramount Sky God. Worth noting is that all the Muslim shrines in focus in Abbink's discussion adhere to a cenobitic lifestyle, wherein individuals reside in communal arrangements, distinguishing them from the primarily eremitic practices prevalent among Ethiopian Christians.

Across northern and central Ethiopia, especially in Wollo, one finds many *zawiya* or Muslim shrines, founded by saints of a Sufi order. The interesting thing is that some of them resemble "monasteries" and are called by the Amharic term *gadam*, like Christian monasteries). I call attention to the concept of monastery without definitively stating that they can be in all respects be equated with the Christian counterpart or are directly derived from them <sup>45</sup> because the *zawiya* in Wollo are places of retreat and religious study, where males and females separately have formed communities committed to pious life, prayer and the study of Quran and Muslim law, and where the "sinful" and "contagious" profane world is kept at bay: they are retreats where people devote themselves to God. They follow a strict daily order both in the organization of labour tasks and ritual life. These "monasteries" are not self-sustaining economic centres, but are mostly supported by farmers in the surrounding area and by private individuals who donate food, labour, cattle and money <sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Abbink, G. J. (2008). Muslim monasteries? Some aspects of religious culture in Northern Ethiopia. *Aethiopia*, 11, 17.

One of the most emblematic cases that exemplifies this coexistence of religious denominations is the *Faraqasa* system <sup>46</sup>, a collection of Muslim sanctuaries scattered throughout Ethiopian territory that transcends political, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries.



Figure 1.6 – Pilgrimage centers of the Faraqasa connection

The distinctive feature of the “*Faraqasa* connection” <sup>47</sup> is that the pilgrimage centers are both Christian and Muslim. What unites them is the story of Sitti Mumina, born in Wollo to a Christian family. Her father was a direct relative of Emperor Yohannes IV (1837-1889), who ruled from 1872 to 1889,

<sup>46</sup> Geda, G. J. (2016). “The Faraqasaa pilgrimage center from Bourdieu’s perspectives of field habitus and capital”. *Studies of Religion in Africa*, 44, 97. «The Faraqasaa Pilgrimage center is situated at a place called Faraqasaa in Arsi zone of the region of Oromia, 225 kilometers south east of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. It was established by Momina, affectionately called Aayyoo [Oromo language, “mother”] Momina, in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Her early life and religious background is very controversial ».

<sup>47</sup> Ishihara, M., cit., 92.

and they were also devoted to his successor Menelik II (1844-1913), the emperor from 1889 to 1913. Legends tell that even Menelik II was aware of Sitti Mumina's ability to communicate with spirits and predict the future. Sitti used *kebat*, a stimulating plant, to aid her supplications to Allah. She embodied duality: born a Christian, her true inclination was towards Islam. Although she converted to Islam, her family remained Christian. Hence, the devotion from both confessions. She became a unifying element between the Christian Amhara elite and the Muslim Arsi Oromo.

Sitti Mumina didn't only unite two religious faiths in her earthly life: the ritual practices, such as the ones of the *hareebu*<sup>48</sup> and *hadras*<sup>49</sup>, and the significance of spirits accompanied both Muslims and Christians into a unique meeting

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibi*, 103. «At Faraqasa, the *hareebu* ritual is conducted every day (except during Ramadan) at around 6:00 A.M., 1:00 P.M., and 6:00 P.M. at the *hadra bets* and at the Segennet. By the call of “*hareebu* (meaning “welcome, come in” in Arabic)”, not only visible human but also invisible spiritual beings are invited to the *hadra bet* to be served coffee. While the *hareebu* ritual at the Segennet is performed among the descendants, close friends and special guests, the *hareebu* rituals held at *hadra bets* are attended by the people in general. Residents living in and around Faraqasa, and pilgrims who wish (or vowed) to present their *galataa* (gratitude) or *ajaa'iba* (miraculous stories) in front of the public (and the spiritual beings present) gather at the *hadra bets* and attend the ritual. The process of serving coffee is basically the same as the daily coffee ceremony conducted at private houses in Ethiopia. The coffee ceremony starts with the roasting of the coffee beans and ends when everybody had been served thrice. What makes it different from the everyday practice is the solemnity with which the coffee is served. It is believed that not only visible human beings but also invisible spirits are attending the ceremony and enjoying the aroma of the coffee. And for this reason, when the servant is ready, he/she announces, “*buna jabau* (please have some coffee)”, expressing his/her wish to serve coffee to those present, visible or invisible. The participants are expected to show respect to the spirits by refraining from chatting among themselves and taking care not to put the coffee cups on the floor after finishing drinking».

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*. «While the *hareebu* rituals are conducted every day, *hadras* are held at night only on specific days. At Faraqasa, when pilgrims are around and many people are in “need” of attending the *hadra*, the *hadra* is held every night after the Ritual of Mediation (described below). But when pilgrims are not around, the nocturnal *hadras* are only held three days a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays at the *hadra bet* in the compound of the Segennet, while at the *hadra bet* adjacent to the Qubba, it is only conducted on Thursdays. The nocturnal *hadra* starts at 11:00 P.M. and continues all night, ending at 6:00 A.M., with the call for the *hareebu* ritual».

ground. One emblematic case is the *hareebu* rite, performed several times a day, except during the period of Ramadan. It involves the solemn preparation of coffee, starting from roasting to the final sipping. Participants from both faiths are required to observe silence and refrain from placing the cups on the ground. This respectful silence extends to the invisible spirits, who also participate in the ceremony. The ritual not only brings the confessions together in a solemn and purifying rite but also in the belief in the existence of invisible spirits, benevolent or malevolent, coexisting with visible spirits, i.e., humans. As reported by Bartels, the boundary between what is human and what is supernatural transcends the geographical environment <sup>50</sup>.

During the *hadra* ritual the Shaykhs, the so-called educated Muslim men, recite the verses while the drums are played. Both Muslims and Christians participate together in the rite, which takes place at night. Many may end up being possessed by spirits.

Regarding the ceremonies related to *zar*, a common usage is also noted between Christians and Muslims, which in this brief excerpt is attributed to a “illicit” type of religion:

Les Oromo Mecca et Tulama semblaient être d’aussi bons chrétiens que les Qottu et Ittu du Hararge étaient de bons musulmans. Tout au plus peut-on noter l’importance de demiurges, de sorciers [...] qui réunissaient, au cours de séances nocturnes, des dizaines et parfois des centaines de participants dans leurs temples ou *galma* (Lewis 1970). Ils guérissaient les maladies, réconciliaient les adversaires et prédisaient l’avenir en accomplissant des sacrifices qui rappellent les cérémonies *zar* [...] <sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Bartels, L. (1983) *Oromo Religion. Myths and Rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia. An Attempt to Understand*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.

<sup>51</sup> Leiris, M. (1980). *La possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar*. Paris. Le Sycomore and Gascon, A. & Hirsch, B. (1992). Les espaces sacrés comme lieux de confluence religieuse en Éthiopie (Shrines Where Religions Meet in Ethiopia). *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, 32(128), 697. (transl). «The Oromo of Mecca and Tulama seemed to be as good Christians as the Qottu and Ittu of Hararge were good Muslims. At most, one can note the importance of

In the case of possession, the *zar* ritual is performed. This ritual, also found in the Horn of Africa as reported by Professor Beatrice Nicolini, is conducted to exorcise such negative spirits<sup>52</sup>.

In *Faraqasa* connection, the sacred places are considered to be of Muslim tradition<sup>53</sup> but interestingly, even though the founder was a Muslim, each of the holy water springs scattered along the southern slope descending to the Homba River bears the names of Christian saints.

The sacredness of these places is thus preserved by both Muslims and Christians: religious boundaries are not completely removed or eliminated but temporarily shifted, favouring the public space as a place of encounter, evocation, and coexistence with the spirits. The element of religious xenophobia is minimized, with sporadic attacks from Christian missionaries. Muslim Salafis are not recognized as a threat<sup>54</sup>.

Regarding the matter of spirits, it is a common belief that if a person maintains a good relationship with their guardian spirit, the spirit itself will guide the person in their destiny. Spirits transcend religions, and Sitti Mumina embodies the trans-religious mediation.

It is essential to highlight that even the worship of spirits represents an element of unity<sup>55</sup> between the two religious confessions since both the

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demiurges, sorcerers [...] who gathered dozens and sometimes hundreds of participants during nocturnal sessions in their temples or galma (Lewis 1970). They healed illnesses, reconciled adversaries, and predicted the future by performing sacrifices reminiscent of zar ceremonies.»

<sup>52</sup> Nicolini, B., *Some thoughts on the Magical Practices of the Zar along the Red Sea in the Sudan, People of the Red Sea*, Archaeopress, Oxford 2005: 157-161.

<sup>53</sup> Ishihara, M., cit., 107. The presence of mosques is minimal, and the *azan*, the call to obligatory prayer, is scarcely audible. Instead, what one hears is the *hareebu*, the inviting call for coffee services at the *hadra bet*.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibi*, 109.

<sup>55</sup> Geda, G. J., cit., 96. «It is the habitus of the pilgrims which drives their practices at the center, their participation in the various rituals and their singing of songs praising the miracles performed in the name of the center and its various leaders».



Orthodox Christian clergy and the Muslim *ulamas* oppose indigenous practices of spirit worship, both embodying the orthodox concept of monotheistic religion. Religious practices, as well as certain beliefs, seem to be embraced by the other confession and vice versa, leading to a level of participation, as mentioned earlier. Some scholars have theorized a form of vulgarization<sup>56</sup> that has caused believers to deviate from the original code.

[...] the veneration of saints fits into the patterns of pre-Muslim beliefs and practices... the deeply rooted ancestor cult can smoothly be substituted by a type of veneration which is acceptable to Islam... many sanctuaries of the old religion have thus been transformed into Muslim ones.<sup>57</sup>

I would define this process as of “adaptive significance” linked to the historical, geographical, social, and even economic Ethiopian context. This applies to the Muslims analyzed by Trimingham, but also to Christians in the case study of the city of Harar<sup>58</sup>, where the majority is Muslim, and Christians have adopted customs from the other confession.

If the *Faraqasa* connection, abundant with religious sites initially of Islamic origin, stands as a contemporary instance of religious coexistence, similarly in Southern Ethiopia, on the Qulubi Mountains, the church dedicated to Saint Gabriel represents a Christian place of worship capable of attracting Muslim adherents as well, serving as a meeting point between religious denominations.

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<sup>56</sup> Trimingham, J. S. (1965). *Islam in Ethiopia*. London: Routledge, 233-234.

<sup>57</sup> Camilla C. T. Gibb. (1999). Baraka without Borders: Integrating Communities in the City of Saints. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 29(1), 97.

<sup>58</sup> Harar is an old settlement located in Eastern Ethiopia, near the present-day town of Dire Dawa and not far from Djibouti. Founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and ruled by independent emirs, it has always been a Muslim stronghold in black Africa.

En Ethiopie du Sud, le plus fréquente des pèlerinages se tenait, fin décembre, au Hararge sur les hauteurs de Qulubi. Hayla Sellase y avait fait bâtir une église dédiée à saint Gabriel pour accomplir le vœu que Ras Makonnen, son père, prononça avant de combattre les troupes de l'émir de Harar à Calanko en 1887. Par piété filiale, il conduisait un pèlerinage où se rendaient la cour, la famille royale et les notables. Outre les Oromo Qottu et les Ittu fortement islamisés, des Harari, des Somalis et des Afar, tous musulmans, assistaient au pèlerinage chrétien dédié à Gabriel. [...] non seulement les pèlerins, le clergé, les moines et les nonnes, mais aussi des marchands, des mendiants, des infirmes et même des prostituées. De part et d'autre de la piste fraîchement asphaltée, une foule de mendiants sollicitait la pitié des pèlerins et la générosité de l'empereur et de son entourage.<sup>59</sup>

The pilgrimage to Qulubi also represents a place of Christian and Muslim convergence, where the pagan element of devotion to nature is added to evoke fertility. Commemorating the conquest of the city, the Qulubi pilgrimage holds deep significance for the Oromo community. Established as an act of filial

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<sup>59</sup> Gascon, A. & Hirsch, B. (1992). Les espaces sacrés comme lieux de confluence religieuse en Éthiopie (Shrines Where Religions Meet in Ethiopia). *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 32(128), 696. (transl). «In Southern Ethiopia, the most frequent pilgrimage took place in late December, in Hararge on the heights of Qulubi. Haile Selassie had a church built there dedicated to Saint Gabriel to fulfil the vow that Ras Makonnen, his father, made before fighting against the troops of the Emir of Harar at Calanko in 1887. Out of filial piety, he led a pilgrimage attended by the court, the royal family, and the dignitaries. In addition to the strongly Islamized Oromo Qottu and Ittu, Harari, Somali, and Afar, all Muslims, also participated in the Christian pilgrimage dedicated to Gabriel. By trains, buses, or special planes, pilgrims travelled there from Choa, Addis Ababa, and all provinces in the South. For three days, an immense tent city housing nearly 100,000 inhabitants hosted not only pilgrims, clergy, monks, and nuns, but also merchants, beggars, the infirm, and even prostitutes. On both sides of the freshly asphalted road, a crowd of beggars solicited the compassion of the pilgrims and the generosity of the emperor and his entourage».

devotion, this pilgrimage constitutes a Christian and Amhara event guided from Addis Ababa into the Muslim and Oromo territories. It raises the question of whether this location bears greater importance for infertile women who circle the sanctuary, as opposed to their non-participation in Christian celebrations. Cowhides play a role in a fertility ritual and also evoke the memory of livestock sacrifices made by returning pilgrims from Abba Muda. Additionally, people frequented this site to catch a glimpse of the emperor and benefit from the generosity of affluent pilgrims who accompanied him <sup>60</sup>.

Islam in Ethiopia was carefully analysed in 1965 by Trimmingham, who reported that Ethiopian Muslims not only changed the “original” code but it also seemed that they vulgarised it; Trimmingham recognised the presence of deviant forms from the original Islam, even attributing them precise denotations such as “saint worship” or “dervish <sup>61</sup> orders” to Sufism <sup>62</sup>. This process of “vernacularisation” highlights the possibility of adaptation to different geographical contexts and can be described as having an “adaptive significance”: researchers have posited the potential existence of discrete independent identities that manifest regional diversity, including but not limited to Oromo, Harari, Afar, and Gurage ethnic groups <sup>63</sup>.

Islam significantly has typified the eastern regions of Ethiopia, encompassing areas such as Wollo and Afar in the northeast, as well as extending

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<sup>60</sup> Baxter, T. W. (1978). Ethiopia's Unacknowledged Problem: The Oromo. *African Affairs*, LXXVII, 308: 283-296.

<sup>61</sup> In Ethiopia, a Dervish typically refers to a member of a Sufi Muslim religious order or sect known for its ascetic practices, mysticism, and devotion to Islamic spirituality. Sufism is a mystical branch of Islam, and Dervishes are often recognized by their distinctive attire and practices, such as whirling dances or Sufi rituals that are aimed at achieving spiritual closeness to God. It's important to note that the specific practices and beliefs of Dervish orders can vary, and there are different Sufi orders with their own traditions and teachings. In Ethiopia, as in other parts of the world, Dervishes have historically played a significant role in the spiritual and cultural life of the Muslim community. They are known for their commitment to a life of poverty, simplicity, and spiritual devotion.

<sup>62</sup> Trimmingham, J. S., cit., 225-269.

<sup>63</sup> Desplat, & Østebø, T., cit., 11.

to Bale in the southeast, alongside Gimma, Gurage, and Benishangul-Gumuz. Observations reveal a diverse spectrum of religious practices, exhibiting variations that may be geographically limited to specific localities or expansively spanning across broader territories, often intersecting and traversing ethno-linguistic boundaries. Notably, certain locales, such as Wollo and Harar, are renowned as centers for religious education, while others house esteemed shrines, exemplified by Shaykh Husayn in Bale.

Le caractère musulman du pèlerinage a Shak Husayn est indéniable: tombeau de saint, mosquée dédiée au fondateur de la Qadiriya et pierre qui ressemble à la Kaaba (Braukamper 1989).<sup>64</sup>

The Islamic religious fabric in Ethiopia is thus presented as fragmented, capable of adapting over time to different regional realities. These units thus seemed previously almost independent<sup>65</sup> and well localised: Oromo, Gurage and Harar, where the mosque, a symbol of affirmation of religious identity, seems to be missing and giving way to shrines<sup>66</sup>. Concerning the utilization of *kebat* in the city of Harar, it has been observed that this customary cultural practice is no

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<sup>64</sup> Gascon, A. & Hirsch, B., cit., 699. (transl.). « The Muslim character of the pilgrimage to Shak Husayn is undeniable: tomb of a saint, mosque dedicated to the founder of the Qadiriya, and a stone resembling the Kaaba (Braukamper 1989)».

<sup>65</sup> Geda, G. J., cit., 96. « It can treat the center as an independent entity within the religious field in Ethiopia competing with the two dominant religions in the country, Islam and Christianity as well as other shrines established by Momina and other notable religious personalities. The concept can also be applied to treat the center as an independent field with various agents such as the religious leaders and pilgrims of various religious, social, political, and geographical backgrounds».

<sup>66</sup> Gibb, C. C. T. (1999). "Baraka without borders: integrating communities in the "city of saints". *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 29(1), 88-108.

longer exclusively associated with religious norms and has thus transcended its originally Muslim context <sup>67</sup>.

[...] it is noteworthy, in fact, the export of khat leaves, from the many bushes that resemble the tea plant and grow endemic on the Ethiopian highlands; their leaves, when chewed fresh, give a euphoric feeling. Khat has always been cultivated by the Oromo tribe, with a Muslim majority. Today khat is harvested in large sacks, early in the morning, and then loaded at the airport in Dire Dawa and shipped to Djibouti, Yemen and Somalia, but not to Saudi Arabia where it is forbidden. During Ramadan khat is forbidden to Muslims, who can chew it in the evening. Khat has always been used only by Muslims: today is not only an evidence of a flourishing trade but also a proof of a new Ethiopia's public space, representing itself an interstitial space of secularism (Kanafani-Zahar 2000, 118-147). The use of khat is a common cultural practice that is no longer labelled by religious norms and is therefore no longer solely Muslim; today is a practice embraced by Ethiopians of different religions, a sign that differences between religious groups have been diminishing and have overtaken different confessional identities.

Harar served as a stronghold for not only the slave trade but also the Islamization of neighbouring regions. Islam found its way to the coastal regions early on through ports inhabited by Arab and Persian merchants. It swiftly spread inland, leading to the foundation of the city of Harar, from where Gagn initiated his campaign. A very few isolated Christian communities, which were established during the empire's expansion in the 14th and 16th centuries, still persist today in secluded areas such as the Galila of the Wonchi volcano, the Zay of Lake Zway, and the churches of the Gamo Mountains. Islam continued to

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<sup>67</sup> Fumagalli, M. (2022). Harar: Case Study of a Muslim City in Ethiopia. *Quaderni di Diritto e Politica Ecclesiastica*, 2, 443-454.

evolve in the 19th century, particularly with the conversion of rulers from Oromo states in the Upper Gibé region, most notably Gimma-Abba Giffar.

The city of Harar served as a focal point on caravan routes frequented by traders and missionaries from the Middle East. Its fortress has perpetually held an aura of mystery, with notable European explorer Richard Burton<sup>68</sup> becoming the first to visit the city in 1854.

[...] the ancient metropolis of a once mighty race, the only permanent settlement in Eastern Africa, the reported seat of Muslim learning, a walled city of stone houses, possessing its independent chief, its peculiar population, its unknown language, its own coinage, the emporium of the coffee trade, (and) the headquarters of slavery [...] <sup>69</sup>

In the Muslim world, Harar holds significant religious importance as the fourth holy city, alongside Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. It is often referred to as the “white city” due to the annual ritual of whitewashing its walls at the onset of Ramadan. Furthermore, the city features the narrow alley of “reconciliation”, where rivals are compelled to make peace if they encounter each other. Harar, however, serves as an epitome of religious coexistence between Muslims and Christians. The unique Ethiopian experience has witnessed a growing Islamic presence living harmoniously alongside the majority Coptic-rite Christian Orthodox community since 1543. In contemporary times, it continued to be a central point for slave traders, as allowed by the ancient *Kebra Negast*<sup>70</sup> code, and

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<sup>68</sup> Burton, R. F. (1855). Narrative of a trip to Harar. *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 25: 136-137.

<sup>69</sup> Camilla C. T. Gibb. (1999). Baraka without Borders: Integrating Communities in the City of Saints. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 29(1), 88.

<sup>70</sup> See glossary.

remained a favored pilgrimage destination for Islam, boasting a multitude of mosques<sup>71</sup>.

Harar continued to serve as a cherished pilgrimage destination for adherents of Islam, featuring an abundance of mosques, with around ninety constructed within its walls over the centuries. Interestingly, the absence of actual minarets is a notable characteristic; instead, one mosque has emerged as a community landmark, guarded meticulously by local residents. Additionally, numerous other mosques, primarily of a private nature, are discreetly tucked away in the labyrinthine alleys. These mosques are often recognized by the presence of a green sticker adorning their weathered wooden gates.

Furthermore, Harar boasts approximately a hundred sites of great sanctity in the Islamic tradition, encompassing tombs, trees, and even rocks. A common practice was to inter Shaykhs beneath the shade of trees, contributing to Harar's epithet as the *Madmat al Awliya*, signifying "the city of saints".

Over time, however, these units did not remain fragmented but rather became intermingled through the ancient caravan and pilgrimage routes<sup>72</sup>. The coexistence and tolerance between adherents of different religions in Ethiopia may have been facilitated by factors such as the country's ethnic diversity<sup>73</sup> and rich indigenous culture. Anthropological studies on various ethnic groups in Ethiopia have revealed diverse forms of Islamic practice. It is evident that Islam and ethnicity are not strictly aligned, as significant Muslim populations exist within predominantly Christian communities, such as the Amhara people in the Gojjam, Wollo, and Gondar regions.

As analyzed by Abbink, studying the "ethnic roots" helps us understand how similar cultural customs and practices are found among ethnic groups of

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<sup>71</sup> Torcini, M. (2012). *Laicità dello Stato e tutela dei diritti individuali in Etiopia. La giurisdizione delle Corti religiose e tradizionali: le Corti Federali della Sharia*, in *I diritti cultural-religiosi dall'Africa all'Europa*, edited by Francesco Alicino and Federica Botti. Torino: Giappichelli, 211.

<sup>72</sup> Desplat, & Østebø, T., cit., 12.

<sup>73</sup> Abbink, J. (1998). An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11, 119.

Christian, Muslim, and traditional origin. Firstly, a sort of mixture of “traditional” pre- or non-Islamic rituals and beliefs with the “official” Islam, including magical practices, initiation, spirit possession, and some divination methods <sup>74</sup>.

Secondly, the significance of saints and holy men, i.e. *awliya*, and the tradition of pilgrimage to their tombs are widespread in Ethiopia, encompassing both Christian and Muslim pilgrimage sites; thirdly, the influence of Sufi mystics and orders has also played a crucial role in the spread of Islam, with membership in a Sufi order often serving as an alternative to traditional initiation and rituals in certain areas <sup>75</sup>.

As analyzed by Gascon and Hirsch, even Ethiopian Christianity has undergone a process of popularization by drawing closer to the ancient cults practiced in Ethiopia, particularly in the Agaw regions<sup>76</sup>. Consequently, we find the places chosen by Ethiopian saints often correspond to sacred spaces such as caves, springs, and even sacred forests. The study of pilgrimages in regions predominantly inhabited by the Oromo community enables the researcher to comprehend the phenomena of historical co-existence between Christian and even Muslim religious practices.

L’histoire des pèlerinages Ethiopiens reste encore, pour l’essentiel, à construire. On peut discerner, au nord comme au sud du pays, un processus d’ “éthiopisation” des pèlerinages: Verus Israel, les hautes terres du nord ont

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<sup>74</sup> Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Trade and the Spread of Islam in Africa*, 2001, <https://www.metmuseum.org>. Islam also reinforced the African passion for geometric design and the repetition of patterns in the decoration of textiles and handicrafts. Local weaving may have been transformed through the importation of North African weaving techniques. Islam has often coexisted with representative traditions such as masking. These practices have often been seen as complementary rather than oppositional to Islam, especially when they are viewed as effective or operating outside the central concerns of the faith.

<sup>75</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 119-120.

<sup>76</sup> Gascon, A. & Hirsch, B., cit., 693-694.



supplante peu à peu Jérusalem et ce phénomène s'observe aussi avec l'essor de Shak Husayn, qui éclipse La Mecque, au grand scandale des Wahhabites. Ce processus est facilité par une représentation de l'espace appuyée sur un réseau de lieux sacrés, selon un système d'emboîtements des échelles locales, regionales et nationales<sup>77</sup>.

In the lands of the Oromo, a complex relationship exists between their traditional cultural practices and the influence of the Christian and Muslim religions brought by European and Arab conquerors. This dynamic can be interpreted in three ways <sup>78</sup>, as described by Gascon and Hirsch in 1992: syncretism, ambiguity, or a deliberate strategy.

Syncretism <sup>79</sup>, a cultural and religious one, is evident as the Oromo have retained many of their cultural traditions, including dances, equestrian events, and offerings, despite the arrival of foreign religions. These practices have been incorporated into official religious ceremonies or carried out very similarly to the original traditions. North-eastern Africa has historically played a significant role in the propagation of major world religions, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These religions, in turn, have exerted a profound influence on the indigenous belief systems in the region. For instance, an Orthodox priest in Waliso has adopted rituals akin to those of the zar, demonstrating a fusion of traditions.

The term “syncretism” encompasses the amalgamation of cultural elements in its broadest sense, commonly associated with the domain of religion and is not confined to phenomena and processes occurring solely within a single religion; it also encompasses interactions between two or more religions. It has been posited that religions consist of various elements, each serving a specific

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<sup>77</sup> Gascon, A. & Hirsch, B., cit., 700-701.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>79</sup> Braukämper, U. (1992). Aspects of Religious Syncretism in Southern Ethiopia. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 22(3), 194-207.

function contributing to the overall functionality of the system. These elements encompass religious doctrines, ritual practices, and other components, all aimed at addressing specific societal issues. The durability of elements introduced from external sources into a religious system is contingent upon their compatibility with the overall system. Otherwise, such elements are liable to be rejected as foreign intrusions within a relatively short period. Survivals, a concept extensively studied by cultural anthropologists, have often revealed themselves to be meaningfully integrated cultural components within a religious system. Their ability to persist, sometimes for centuries, suggests their functional significance and their seamless incorporation into the broader religious framework<sup>80</sup>.

Religious ambiguity is also observed when the line between Orthodox religious practices and Oromo cultural traditions has become blurred. Some Orthodox priests, such as the one in Waliso, have performed exorcism and healing functions in a manner similar to practitioners of Oromo religious traditions. This ambiguity allowed the Oromo to continue practicing their “illegal” religion under the old regime without persecution.

Lastly, a deliberate strategy aimed at preserving cultural identity can be identified. The Oromo have taken advantage of the confusion between religions and the old regime’s willingness to appease religious leaders capable of rallying large followings. Initially, the military regime brought these religious leaders to court, but later ceased pursuing them. This strategy enabled the Oromo to preserve their cultural identity in the context of foreign domination.

Furthermore, it should be noted that certain practices, such as the pilgrimage to Nur Husayn, contributed to the emergence of “nationalist” claims among the Oromo during historical revolts. These sanctuaries and their dynamics influenced the resistance of the Oromo against various external influences, including Somali irredentism.

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<sup>80</sup> Braukämper, U., cit., 194-207.

During the colonial period, Islam in Africa was often characterized as a syncretic, traditional, tolerant, and heterodox form of Islam<sup>81</sup>. This specific version of “African Islam” was termed “Islam *noir*” by the French, a term that held significance both in colonial and scholarly contexts regarding Islam in Africa. Represented by figures such as the Marabouts and Sufi brotherhoods, the prevailing and enduring perception was that Islam, as it expanded in Africa, had gradually incorporated “African elements” and thus evolved into a syncretic form of the religion. In contrast to “African Islam” there existed the concept of “Arab Islam”, which was seen as more scripturalist, orthodox, and originating from external sources, particularly the Middle East and the Arab world. This distinction held particular relevance for French colonialists, who, due to their experiences with anti-colonial movements in North Africa, harboured concerns about a strict “Arab Islam”. Consequently, they dedicated significant efforts to protect “African Islam” from what they perceived as external influences.

This dichotomy between “African Islam” and “Arab Islam” is evident in scholarly works on Islam in Africa. Ernest Gellner’s 1981 well-known distinction between “the saint and the scholar”, influenced by the idea of Redfield related to the “greater and smaller tradition”, exemplifies these essentialist and Orientalist perceptions. Renowned scholar of Islam in Africa, J. S. Trimingham, further argued that despite the spread of Islam in Africa, Africans remained largely ignorant of the religion’s core tenets and never fully embraced Islamic culture. Trimingham contended that Muslim Africa remained isolated from the wider Muslim world, which displayed little to no interest in the continent. Such views have persisted in much of the academic literature, resulting in the tendency to view Islam south of the Sahara as unique, with specific features distinct to Muslim Africa.

This perspective is evident in David Robinson’s work, *Muslim Societies in African History*, where he employs the concepts of the “Islamization of Africa” and the “Africanization of Islam”. While Robinson aims to challenge earlier

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<sup>81</sup> Østebø, T. (2013). “Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia: From Containment to the Production of a ‘Governmental Islam’”. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81: 1032-1033.

conceptions of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa and acknowledges the agency of African Muslims, the phrase “Africanization of Islam” reflects a generalized and essentialized understanding of Africa and the form of Islam that developed on the continent. It leaves little room for local diversity and implies that the spread of Islam was a homogeneous process.

However, more recent scholarship has sought to move beyond these binary categorizations and acknowledge the complexity and diversity of Islamic practices and beliefs in Africa. This approach recognizes that African Islam is not a monolithic entity but comprises a rich tapestry of traditions, cultures, and interpretations that have evolved over centuries. Such nuanced perspectives offer a more accurate understanding of the multifaceted nature of Islam in Africa. From the road southwest of Addis Ababa, it is difficult to distinguish the extraordinary mosaic of populations and religions that meet there because clothing, food, and even houses with sheet metal roofs have standardized the settlements. Away from inhabited areas, on a hill, the conical roof of a round church topped with a cross emerges from an enclosure surrounded by fig and giant juniper trees. Less numerous than in the north of the Nile, these churches were mostly founded by Menelik’s lieutenants, often depicted in the frescoes. In villages that host communities of Muslims, merchants, and artisans from the North and sometimes from Yemen, mosques do not stand out much from other buildings. After the revolution, in the major cities, funds from Arab states have allowed for expansion and the construction of new buildings.

The religious landscape is very different in the east, where each village has its own shrine, and it is said that there are as many mosques and madrasas in Harar as there are days in the year. The countryside is dotted with numerous domed tombs, whitewashed and marked by large trees. The Harari people maintain specific women’s clothing and sometimes wear veils. The influence of Islam is therefore stronger than in the southwest, even around Gimma where tombs can still be found <sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>82</sup> Gascon, A. & Hirsch, B., cit., 695.

## 1.2 Political and Religious Dynamics: Examining Christians and Muslims from the Late 19th Century to the 1930 Imperial Era - National Unity *versus* Collective Identity

In the second half of the 19th century, following the establishment of Islam in the region, a resurgence of Ethiopian Christian nationalism was witnessed. The formation of the modern Ethiopian state can be attributed to policies of expansion and modernization centered around the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia. This process was realized through the conquest of peripheral territories and populations, many of whom were Muslims or had been previously exposed to Islamic influence. From this period onward, a considerable number of Muslims became nominally Ethiopian. However, they found it challenging to attain full citizenship status, as the authorities officially or unofficially considered them as deviating from genuine Ethiopian identity and as potential enemies linked to external rivals<sup>83</sup>.

The political strategy of establishing Christian hegemony over surrounding Muslim territories was rooted in the memory of religious wars of the 16th century and fuelled by the belief that the reconquest of lost provinces would revive the golden age of the medieval empire and usher in a new era of prosperity for a Greater Ethiopia. This Christian expansionism, partly driven by irredentism, the desire to annex lands based on historical possession, was further incentivized by the international context, where Muslim countries, including Egypt, which was particularly significant in Ethiopian consciousness, were under the occupation of European powers. The Ethiopian leaders of the second half of the 19th century - Emperor Tewodros II (1818-1868), Yohannes IV (1837-1889), and Menelik II (1844-1913) - aimed to elevate Ethiopia to the status of major powers in a world dominated by European Christian colonial empires. Furthermore, Europeans provided direct and indirect assistance to the

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<sup>83</sup> Ficquet, É. (2015). *The Ethiopian Muslims: historical processes and ongoing controversies*. in Prunier, G. & Ficquet, É. (2015). *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*. C. Hurst & Co, 93.

Ethiopian Christians by selling them firearms and offering technological advice, which had influence on the battlefields.

The violent means of annexation, including attempts to enforce mass conversions and oppressive occupation regimes, led to resistance within Muslim communities. The policy of annexation also exacerbated the hostility of Islamic anti-colonial movements in neighbouring countries, such as the Mahdist Sudan and Somaliland, where Muhammad Abdille Hassan, the so-called *Mad Mullab* led a rebellion against colonial forces.

The policy framework pursued by the Ethiopian emperors before the 19th century exhibited a stance of tolerance towards Muslim traders and intermediaries, while concurrently harbouring reservations regarding their inclusion within significant positions within the state apparatus, which was primarily dominated by the Christian populace. Moreover, this sentiment extended to the military establishment. Notably, Muslims were consistently excluded from acquiring hereditary land rights, a prominent feature of the cultural landscape of highland Ethiopian Christianity, particularly within the Amhara and Tigray communities. Internally, the Muslim communities enjoyed a degree of autonomy, particularly in matters pertaining to religious jurisprudence.

This policy of harmonious coexistence endured with nuanced adjustments until the reign of Emperor Tewodros (1855-1868), who endeavoured to reestablish centralized authority subsequent to a period characterized by disunity, colloquially referred to as the “Era of Princes”. During this epoch, regional magnates enjoyed quasi-independence, thereby challenging the semblance of imperial control ostensibly maintained by titular emperors based in the Gondar court. It is notable that within this temporal context, Islamic Oromo provincial leaders, notably in Wollo and Yeju within the northern Ethiopian expanse, emerged as pivotal and influential elements.

Emperor Tewodros (1855-1868) embarked upon a renewed emphasis on Orthodox Christianity, effectively repositioning it as a fundamental and programmatic tenet underpinning Ethiopian national identity and the confluence of the state. This strategic realignment aimed at fostering unity and

cohesion within the Ethiopian sociopolitical fabric. However, the imperial endeavour had to contend with a heterogeneous reality composed of multiple religious denominations:

[...] Islam has inevitably been in an inferior position vis-à-vis Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia in terms of political influence and cultural dominance (as well as numbers). [...] while the head of the Church officiated in the crowning ceremony of the emperors. The Church was until 1974 also the largest land-owner in the country. But Christianity was never the officially prescribed 'state religion', and emperors and the clergy were often at odds on matters of policy, issues of morality, or law and justice. There was, however, a serious and inherent problem of 'national integration' in Ethiopia since the emergence of the imperial state: central monarchical rule and its extension over steadily increasing areas with diverse religious and ethno-cultural groups increased the challenge of a unitary discourse and an overarching national identity. This issue was never resolved but only controlled and managed, with violent means if need be.<sup>84</sup>

During the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Yohannes IV (1837-1889), who held the title of *Negus*<sup>85</sup> of Tigray<sup>86</sup>, undertook the journey to claim the Solomonic throne. His ascendancy to the throne followed his victory over the

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<sup>84</sup> Abbink, J. (1998). An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11, 115.

<sup>85</sup> See *glossary*.

<sup>86</sup> Negus. (2014). In *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (Vol. 3. He-N). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. See also Negus. (1953). In *Enciclopedia Motta* (1st. ed., Vol. 4, 379). Milano: Federico Motta Editore. (transl). «Abyssinian royal title, once given to dynastic principles or blood or imperial delegates in the peripheral territories. It was conferred by John IV in 1879 to the princes of Scioa and Gojjam. The emperor of Ethiopia is the Negus Neghesti (Negusa nagast) or "king of kings" ».

Amara Ras<sup>87</sup> in the Battle of Adwa in 1872. As of that year, he adopted the title of *Negus Neghesti*<sup>88</sup>, signifying his role as the Emperor of Ethiopia. Seeking to solidify his rule, Yohannes IV (1837-1889) looked for support in the Agomeder province, where he offered tribute to the vassal king in exchange for submission.

Yohannes IV (1837-1889) had exercised unquestionable supremacy and power, especially in the Wollo. Ethiopia at the level of state consolidation occupied Abyssinia and included several kingdoms: under the empire of Yohannes IV (1837-1889) was then formed by the Tigray, his hereditary possession and the bitter, which he managed to conquer. He obtained an act of submission in the Gojjam, ruled by *Ras* Adal then *Negus* Tecla Haimanot, in the Agademmer, ruled by *Ras* Alula, and in the Wollo Galla, ruled by *Ras* Micael his godson and Areà Selassie his son.

Yohannes IV (1837-1889) envisioned that triumph over the *Dervishes*<sup>89</sup> would enhance his authority and garner greater appreciation from the Christian communities in the region. During his reign, Yohannes pursued the objective of establishing religious homogeneity within his realm. This pursuit culminated at the Council of Bor Meda in May 1878, where the monarch, driven by the desire to resolve the internal schisms within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, promulgated the Tewahedo doctrine as the sole sanctioned faith within the nation. Yohannes could rely on the support of various regional potentates, most notably *Negus* Menilek of Sawa and *ras* Adal Tesamma of Gojjam, both of whom were present at the Council of Bor Meda and concurred with the monarch's stance, a rare alignment of interests. Those adherents of the alternative doctrines faced persecution and were compelled to acknowledge the newly decreed official faith of the kingdom.

Yet, at the Council of Bor Meda, Yohannes also issued a decree necessitating that Muslims and individuals identified as pagans convert to Christianity within a two-year timeframe or depart the country. This directive

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<sup>87</sup> See glossary.

<sup>88</sup> See glossary.

<sup>89</sup> See glossary.



heralded a wave of persecution against Muslims, particularly in the Wollo region, where organized campaigns of forced and mass conversions unfolded. Notably, local rulers in this region embraced Christianity shortly following the Council, including imam Māhammād Ali, who was the ruler of Warra Himamo.

Evidently, the ideological apparatus employed to rationalize Yohannes IV (1837-1889)'s royal standing could be deemed adequate for justifying his confrontation with Muslims. While numerous historical inquiries have scrutinized the extensive evolution of the ideological mechanisms used by Tewodros II (1818-1868) and Yohannes IV (1837-1889) to substantiate their royal authority, there remains a dearth of research concerning the ideological underpinnings advanced by Yohannes to vindicate his actions against Muslims. Given that the neo-Solomonic ideology centered on the promotion of Christianity and the Christian facets of the Ethiopian monarchy, it could be construed as advocating religious and cultural homogeneity within Ethiopia. Consequently, some historians posit that Yohannes's proclamation of religious uniformity for Ethiopia and his ensuing conflict with Muslims were not surprising. The stance of the King of Kings toward Muslims can be perceived by certain historians as the "natural" outcome of the evolution of the Ethiopian monarchy.

Certainly, the strategic use of prophecy played a pivotal role in the nation-building efforts of Christianity *vis-à-vis* Islam, serving as a shrewd political tool that undoubtedly resonated deeply with the masses. A Ge'ez text, likely penned between 1881 and 1889, came to light in 2012 and was documented by the Ethio-SPaRe project team in Tāmben, located in East Tigray. This text delves into a Muslim prophecy regarding the reign of King of Kings Yohannes IV (1837-1889), who ruled from 1872 to 1889. Attributed to foreign Muslim authorities, the text ostensibly takes the form of a missive directed at the Muslim population residing in the Wollo region.

According to the putative author, Yohannes assumes a divine mantle, a role prophesied in advance. Consequently, the text fervently advocates for the immediate submission of Wollo's Muslim populace to the Christian monarch. This document exhibits distinctive characteristics, and a thorough analysis of its

content suggests its origination within a Christian Orthodox context. Its purpose appears to be the rationalization of the stringent policies enforced against Ethiopian Muslims during that period. Consequently, this text provokes a critical examination of the ideological framework cultivated and disseminated within the court of Yohannes IV (1837-1889).

The emergence of a text within an ecclesiastic milieu at that particular juncture raises intriguing questions regarding its intended purpose. Firstly, it prompts inquiry into the target audience. Although the text ostensibly presents arguments to persuade the Muslims of Wollo to embrace Christianity and yield to King Yohannes's rule, it is highly likely that these Muslims were not the primary audience envisioned by the author. Several factors support this conjecture: the text is written in Ge'ez, discovered within a Tigray monastery, and does not appear to have been disseminated in Wollo.

However, a recent discovery prompts a fresh examination of this period and encourages a reevaluation of such assumptions. Historians have traditionally explicated this new policy toward Muslims in Ethiopia within the context of the evolving characteristics of the Ethiopian monarchy. Both King of Kings Tewodros II (1818-1868) and his successor, Yohannes IV (1837-1889), undertook the task of reconstituting royal authority in Ethiopia. Supported by an intensive propaganda campaign in which the neo-Solomonic ideology played a prominent role, they laboured to fortify the royal power, which had been weakened during the period known as the *zemene misafint*<sup>90</sup>, and to consolidate, through either coercive or diplomatic means, all regions of Ethiopia under their personal dominion.

History and literature were marshalled to validate the novel position of the King of Kings. For instance, the *Kebra Negast*<sup>91</sup> was employed to legitimize the Christian and authoritarian political culture in Ethiopia. In contrast, Yohannes IV (1837-1889) appropriated the Axumite heritage and the Christian character of Ethiopia, styling himself as the "Elect of God and King of Zion". By creating

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<sup>90</sup> See *glossary*.

<sup>91</sup> See *glossary*.

and developing new royal regalia, exercising exclusive control over them, and intertwining history, ideology, and violence, the monarchs and their adherents diligently sought to legitimize their hegemonic ascendancy within the Ethiopian political arena <sup>92</sup>.

In light of these circumstances, it becomes plausible that the text's objective was to justify Yohannes's policies within the broader Amhara-Tigray society. This hypothesis gains credence and implies that there was a requirement to defend the legitimacy of the king's authority and his stance toward Muslims in Wollo. This text, along with others found in the same manuscript, seems to have been created to persuade individuals of the imperative need to convert the Muslim population in Ethiopia. Lastly, the text presented here elucidates that even within Muslim territories, the populace recognized the ascendancy of Yohannes and his political objectives.

This victory upon the Dervishes would position him as the revered saviour of Ethiopia, divinely chosen for his role. Tragically, the ill-fated campaign against the Muslim populace of Metemma, undertaken with a weary and overextended army, led to disastrous consequences. As pointed out by Abbink, the envisioned national unity by the imperial house remained elusive:

As far as the issue of religious identity was concerned, only emperors Tewodros (r. 1855-1868) and Yohannes IV (r. 1872-1889) attempted to formally proscribe the practice of the Islamic religion, endeavouring to enforce mass conversion to Christianity to enhance national unity. However, despite several

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<sup>92</sup> Ancel, S. (2015). A Muslim Prophecy Justifying the Conversion of Ethiopian Muslims to Christianity during Yohannes IV's Reign. A Text Found in a Manuscript in Eastern Tigray / Une prophétie musulmane justifiant la conversion des musulmans éthiopiens au christianisme sous le règne de Yohannes IV. Un texte issu d'un manuscrit du Tigré oriental. *Annales d'Ethiopie*, 30, 316-317.

initial campaigns, their edicts had no serious and long-term effect on the religions situation in Ethiopia.<sup>93</sup>

Ethiopia, in the beginning of the twentieth century, was in a state of turmoil, undergoing a process of state formation through expansion and conquest, emerging as a multi-religious and a multi-ethnic state under the hegemony of the Christian Amhara.

Menelik (1844-1913)'s self-proclamation as *Negus Negbesti*, with the name of Menelik II of Ethiopia, was supported by several provincial governors to whom he asked, and received, loyalty: the Gojjam, the Wollo-Galla and the Beghemeder<sup>94</sup>. Emperor Menelik II (1844-1913) also harboured the aspiration to promote further religious unity. Nonetheless, following several futile attempts at mass campaigns and uprisings, he opted not to employ coercive force or legal measures to achieve this objective. Such a determination was contingent upon the condition that the predominance of Christianity as the ideological bedrock of the empire and the allegiance of the elite were upheld. The expansionist endeavours undertaken by Emperor Menelik, which culminated in nearly doubling the dimensions of Ethiopia by the late 19th century, traversed numerous Islamic and non-Christian regions, including the territories inhabited by the Oromo, Sidama, Harari, Somali, Wolayta, and Kaficho communities;

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<sup>93</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 115.

<sup>94</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Commissione per la pubblicazione dei documenti diplomatici, *I documenti diplomatici italiani. Seconda serie: 1870-1896*, vol. XXIII, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma, 1995, 11. On 9 September 1889 Earl Antonelli wrote to the President of the Council and Foreign Minister Crispi: «Il potente rivale si proclamò subito re dei re dell’Etiopia [...]». (transl.) “The powerful rival immediately proclaimed himself king of the kings of Ethiopia and as such they recognized him as the Gojjam, the Uollo, the Beghemeder. All this Menelik did without using force. I, who was with him, saw that he acted with a truly admirable calm and security. I could convince myself more and more of his intelligence and fine tact with which he knew how to deal with questions concerning his new and coveted position. In a few months, minus Tigré, he conquered the whole kingdom of John without losing the vast kingdom of the Galla, to have today an empire that in Ethiopian history has no other success than in the ancient emperors before the invasion of Gragne”.

various Cushitic peoples such as the Oromo, Afar, and Somali, as well as the Omotic peoples situated south of the Blue Nile, were integrated into Ethiopia<sup>95</sup>.

Amidst this southward trajectory, diverse populations, entrenched in resistance against subjugation and conquest, adopted Islam as an ideology of defiance against Christian dominion. These dominions, typically, expropriated substantial portions of land from these populations and inflicted damage upon or altered their economic structures. The Arsi Oromo, residing approximately 200-300 km south of Addis Ababa, serve as a case in point<sup>96</sup>. In the early 1880s, Emperor Menelik perceived them as a target for extensive cattle raids. Eventually, their land was subjected to a violent conquest, during which the Arsi<sup>97</sup> came to associate Christianity, the religion of the imperial house and the armed forces, with pillage, cruelty, grave injustice, and oppression.

Some peripheral groups, who still practiced indigenous religions, embraced Islam as a way to protect themselves from Christian dominance and exploitation. Emperor Menelik II, aware of the risk of alienating Muslims in his nation-building efforts, chose a more conciliatory approach.

On May 2, 1889, in the city of Wuchale in the heart of Ethiopia, Emperor Menelik II (1844-1913) and Earl Antonelli (1853-1901), representing King Umberto I (1844-1900), inked the Treaty of Wuchale<sup>98</sup>. Earl Antonelli encountered Menelik in a state of noticeable excitement and delivered what he had promised<sup>99</sup>. It's worth noting that this treaty held significant implications for

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<sup>95</sup> This integration can be traced back to the 16th century during Ahmed Gagn's *jihad*, even though their involvement in the country's internal history gained significant traction after the conquest.

<sup>96</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 116.

<sup>97</sup> Arsi used to have a traditional religious belief system.

<sup>98</sup> He was Commander of the Crown of Italy and knight of SS. Maurizio and Lazzaro.

<sup>99</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Commissione per la pubblicazione dei documenti diplomatici, cit., 12. On 9 September 1889 Earl Antonelli wrote to the President of the Council and Foreign Minister Crispi: « [...] ». (transl.) "I arrived at the Scioa in February this year [...]. I found the king in a very excited state of mind, \* when I arrived \* I had to convince myself that the weapons, the ammunition \* the money \*, however much I liked it, did not completely satisfy him. The army of the Shoo was staggered along the left bank of the river Abat in the afloat countries of

international commitments in the Ethiopian region. While the Italians aimed to uphold the treaty's good intentions, England, represented by Admiral Hewitt, was determined to sign the treaty with a substantial military agenda to form an alliance against Muslim interests. Hewitt, who lacked a friendly rapport with Menelik II (1844-1913), ultimately ended up with a treaty that favored the latter<sup>100</sup>.

The period of hostility between Ethiopia and Italy ensued for various reasons: Italy, with the backing of Great Britain from 1890 to 1896, attempted to establish a protectorate, increasing military and financial support. Intrigues at the Ethiopian court intensified, with Menelik's intention to expel Italy and align with France and Russia<sup>101</sup>, who had legations in the country and could provide the necessary weaponry<sup>102</sup>. A textual misunderstanding of Article XVII led to the

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the south, and on the very day of my arrival, couriers had come to the king from his generals that King John on Amuru's side had forded the river Abai and was already on the territory belonging to the Shoo. What interested the king most of all at that decisive moment was that he could be sure that on the Massawa side he was acting militarily; instead Tigré's informers assured that the whole country was calm with degiac Ailu Mariam and Debeb: as for the Italians, not only were they not preparing for war, but they had also reopened the Massawa way to commerce".

<sup>100</sup> *Ibi*, 16. «[...]». (transl.) "England with all the prestige acquired in the expedition of Magdala, after having placed on the throne an emanation of its own - King John - wanted with these to make a treaty with the aim of joining the Ethiopian forces to the English to beat the Muslims, constant danger of all Ethiopia, and failed. Despite all the advantages proposed, Admiral Hewitt obtained only a treaty where all the advantages were for King John and none for England. All this happened because Hewitt found in king John the traditional repugnance of making treaties".

<sup>101</sup> *Ibi*, pp. 178-179. « Menelik was impressed with Leontiev's powerful and persuasive manner of speaking [...]. [...] mission was to bring about some kind of union between the two Orthodox churches. [...]. They knew that the czar claimed to be protector and leader of all Orthodox Christians, including themselves. [...] Members of Menelik's delegation occupied modest positions in the imperial Ethiopian hierarchy, and Leontiev [...] simply promoted everyone to ranks certain to impress. On July 13, 1895 they and Leontiev were ushered into the presence of Czar Nicholas and Czarina Alexandra. [...]».

<sup>102</sup> Norok. (1935). Appunti storici sull' Etiopia: «Il Regno di Menelik». *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 2(3/4), 296.

denunciation of the treaty<sup>103</sup>. Additionally, Ras Mengasha's submission to Italy, despite Menelik's efforts to court him for stirring up leaders in the Eritrean Colony, further exacerbated tensions<sup>104</sup>.

In 1893, Crispi's intentions were clearly aimed at absorbing Ethiopia. In 1894, General Baratieri, who succeeded General Gandolfi, successfully quelled the revolt in Eritrea by defeating Bata Agos.

On December 25, Baratieri decided to march on Adwa with 3,500 men, launching an offensive against Ras Mengasha. The Tigrynia population seemed receptive; the Coptic priests presented crosses for kissing, and some leaders were respectful. Everything appeared to align with Italy in this endeavour, which was not anti-Christian but aimed at maintaining peace and preventing conflict<sup>105</sup>.

After defeating Mengasha, Italy faced crucial decisions. Italy pondered whether a political-military action in East Africa was necessary to forcibly establish an Italian protectorate or whether a troop withdrawal from Eritrea, accepting the denunciation of the Treaty, was the preferred option.

Italy's dilemma was essentially a matter of responsibility, a political rather than military resolution, which would fall to the King's Government. However, there was a lack of consensus, with the government deferring to the judgment of the expeditionary corps commander, who favored a cautious invasion of Tigray and Agamè. While Mengasha Ras fortified his position and sought assistance from Scioa, Italy faced a crisis. At this juncture, Ethiopia found the strength to defeat Italy as it was divided between international acclaim and domestic unpopularity. The economic costs were substantial, with the budget for the colony initially set at 13 million lire<sup>106</sup>, but later reduced to 9 million, leading to the repatriation of three Italian battalions and the dissolution of two indigenous battalions.

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<sup>103</sup> Reader, J. (2017). *Africa. Biografia di un continente*. Mondadori, 583.

<sup>104</sup> Norok, cit., p. 296.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 297-300.

On December 7, 1895, Menelik successfully rallied central Ethiopian leaders in Scioa to confront Major Toselli's troops at Amba Alagi. Although Toselli managed to defeat them and *Ras Makonnen*<sup>107</sup>, the vanguard leader, hastily disclaimed responsibility for attacking Amba Alagi. The chosen military routes, while tactically sound, posed logistical challenges with steep, narrow roads unsuitable for pack animals. Many camel drivers fled to avoid bandits. Supply lines from Massawa were hampered, causing concern. Retreating to Adwa became almost inevitable<sup>108</sup>. Crispi's clairvoyance and patriotism was aware of the narrow-mindedness of the political figures in what was aptly termed "Italietta". He dispatched General Baratieri to support General Baldissera, but due to timing, Baratieri decided to declare war.

On March 1, 1896, a decisive battle unfolded in Adwa between the Italian and Ethiopian armies<sup>109</sup>. The Italian force, comprising 15,800 fighters (including 10,000 Italians) and 56 cannons, faced a formidable 100,000 Abyssinians. The Italian army, composed of Italian soldiers and *Regi Corpi Truppe Coloniali*, suffered losses of 3,179 soldiers and 2,000 askari, representing over 40% of its expeditionary corps. Equipment, artillery, and rifles also incurred substantial losses, with an estimated 11,000 rifles lost

As the analysis of state consolidation revealed the end of the dream of a protectorate, it became impossible for Menelik (1884-1913) to reclaim Eritrea. Six reasons accounted for this decision: 7,000 casualties, over 10,000 wounded,

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<sup>107</sup> Note: *Ras Makonnen* was the father of the future *Negus Negbesti* Hailé Selassié, born in 1892. Makonnen was the cousin of Menelik II: they collaborated from the beginning and were called "the builders of 20th century Ethiopia".

<sup>108</sup> *Ibi*, p. 303.

<sup>109</sup> Etiopia. (1953). In *Enciclopedia Motta* (1st. ed., Vol. 2, p. 809). Milano: Federico Motta Editore. «Menelik [...] divenne imperatore d'E. coll'appoggio dell'Italia, ma più tardi ci si schierò contro e con forze preponderanti ci soverchiò a Adua (1 marzo 1896): noi riconoscemmo l'indipendenza dell'E. e restringemmo i confini dei nostri possedimenti coloniali». (transl). «Menelik became the Emperor of Ethiopia with Italy's support, but later he turned against us, and he overpowered us with overwhelming forces at Adwa on March 1, 1896. Subsequently, we recognized Ethiopia's independence and narrowed the borders of our colonial possessions».



extensive supply lines, limited resources, unreliable water supply, and the fatigue of soldiers.

Nevertheless, Menelik emerged victorious<sup>110</sup>. The 100,000 Abyssinians symbolized the Ethiopian people's determination and trust in creating a strong, united state, despite internal divisions, to confront external threats<sup>111</sup>.

The most prudent solution for Menelik II (1844-1913) and Italy was the negotiation of a new treaty. The King's government imposed peace and led to Crispi's resignation<sup>112</sup>.

Following their victory in the Battle of Adwa against the Italians in 1896, Ethiopia's independence was secured against the looming threat of colonial invasion, with international treaties guaranteeing its borders. To strengthen the nation within its expanded framework, the monarchy needed the participation of all Ethiopians, including the recently incorporated Muslim communities and entities. The Muslim areas held particular significance as they had become

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<sup>110</sup> Note: the defeat of the Italian army was an epochal event, which would condition Italian politics even during Fascism, with the well-known invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Sir Rupert Smith remembers how a battle is full of details, capable of determining sometimes unexpected outcomes: «Una battaglia è un evento fatto di dettagli, non importa quanta pianificazione, quante esercitazioni e quanti addestramenti la precedano. Le possibilità di vittoria sono senza dubbio accresciute da una preparazione adeguata, ma in definitiva i contendenti combattono la battaglia di quel particolare giorno: in un altro giorno, pur nella stessa località, con esattamente le stesse forze, si troverebbero a combattere una battaglia diversa in circostanze differenti» in Smith, R. (2009). *L'arte della guerra nel mondo contemporaneo*. Bologna: il Mulino, 117.

<sup>111</sup> Collins, R. O., cit., p. 166. «This dramatic victory by a technically inferior African nation against the army of a European invader had a profound and lasting impact on Africa. It is remembered throughout Africa today. March 1 is the Ethiopian national holidays, and Addis Ababa is the headquarters of the African Union. The Italian defeat opened the way for French expeditions from Ethiopia and another under Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand to seize the upper Nile waters at Fashoda and challenge British control in Egypt and at the Suez Canal».

<sup>112</sup> Norok, cit., pp. 305. We read in reference to the men of the "Italietta": «[...] non vollero neppur sentire parlare di rivincita; imposero a Crispi di dimettersi e al Governo del Re di concludere la pace».

“buffer zones”<sup>113</sup> between the core of the kingdom and neighbouring countries under colonial rule. These regions also served as links between Ethiopia and the wider world through international trade networks. Menelik recognized that Muslims were vital to the country’s economic well-being. As a result, his government tolerated their distinctiveness as long as they discreetly practiced their faith and accepted Christian dominance even in predominantly Muslim regions. On December 12, 1913, a significant transition occurred as the eighteen-year-old *Ligg*<sup>114</sup> Yasu – also *Lij* Iyasu - (1895-1935) assumed the throne<sup>115</sup>, holding his position for a duration of thirty-three months<sup>116</sup>. *Ligg* Yasu was the son of a Muslim lord from the Wollo region who had embraced the Christian faith.

Yasu was just sixteen years old when the Emperor passed away in 1913. Although educated as a Christian prince, he was the son of a Muslim lord from Wollo who had converted to Christianity, following a pattern of political conversions that had become quite common in that region since the late 18th century. During his brief reign, *Ligg* Yasu sought to embrace religious diversity by regularly visiting Muslim leaders and forging alliances with them. He demonstrated respect for them through symbolic gestures such as wearing Muslim attire and did not conceal his Muslim heritage, taking pride in embodying

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<sup>113</sup> Ficquet, É. (2015). *The Ethiopian Muslims: historical processes and ongoing controversies*. in Prunier, G. & Ficquet, É. (2015). *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*. C. Hurst & Co, 99.

<sup>114</sup> Note: it could be even found the diction *Lij* also *Lijj* Iyasu as Abbink reported here. Abbink, J. (1998): An historical-anthropological approach to Islam in Ethiopia: issues of identity and politics. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 11, 2, 116.

<sup>115</sup> Keller, E. J. (1989). *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People’s Republic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 42. «Menelik has designed Lij Yasu, his grandson, as his heir, but this move vigorously opposed by his wife, the Empress Taitu, who preferred her daughter Zauditu. [...]. A group of Shoan noblemen who supported Lij Yasu won out. They installed a regency government that ruled in an advisory capacity to Lij Yasu, who became de facto emperor in 1910 at the age of sixteen. During his brief reign Lij Yasu conclusively demonstrated that he was not cut from the same cloth as previous great Ethiopian leaders. He made many enemies among the clergy and the nobility. He made many mistakes [...]».

<sup>116</sup> Norok, cit., 323.

the alliance between the two sacred dynasties of King Solomon and the Prophet Muhammad. His political behaviour suggests that he likely had in mind some form of syncretic fusion of the two religions, or at least equal status, which would have abolished religious discrimination and strengthened Ethiopia's future. His numerous marriages to both Christian and Muslim women from the ruling families of all Ethiopian regions can be understood in this conciliatory perspective.

He was also concerned about geopolitical matters. In the context of World War I, he sympathized with Turkey and Germany against France, Britain, and Italy. In fact, these three colonial powers had agreed to divide Menelik's empire after his death, and senior officers who advised him had warned him about this threat. The way he ruled has remained obscure and misunderstood by most historians, who have generally reduced his reign to its impulsive and immature nature. His benevolent attitude towards Islam was provocative to conservative challengers. Exploiting his ambiguous behaviour, they used the communication technologies of the time (printed propaganda, manipulated photographs) to convince the public that Iyasu could not be crowned because, they argued, he had converted to Islam. He was excommunicated and deposed in September 1916, captured in 1921, and held in custody until his murder in 1935.

During his reign, a notable shift from the previous negus' established order started to manifest, leading to a gradual erosion of political stability. In the present era, as documented by Abbink, Ethiopia has witnessed two concise yet significant occurrences that underscore the inherent tension existing between Islam and the notions of national identity and integration. These events unfolded during the Iyasu intermezzo and the period of Italian occupation.

Soltanto il grande prestigio di Menelik e l'autorità che glie ne derivava  
[...] avevano per tempo del suo regno grandemente ridotto l'influenza dei capi

feudali: ora questi di fronte ad un sovrano giovane e debole [...] rialzavano il capo e si imponevano alla Corona.<sup>117</sup>

From a political standpoint, Iyasu exhibited a degree of immaturity and lacked clear policies, with the exception of his endeavour to integrate Muslims within the framework of the Ethiopian nation-state project. He maintained frequent relations with Muslim leaders, forming alliances with them, including through mixed marriages or concubinage with their daughters and sought to circumvent the established Christian elites of central Ethiopia. Furthermore, Iyasu established contacts with Turkey and with the Somali rebel leader Mohammed 'Abdilleh Hassan, who opposed the British. In stark contrast to prevailing sentiments and religious authorities, Lijig Iyasu increasingly exhibited a notable inclination towards the Muslim world<sup>118</sup>. His decision to elevate his father, Ras Micael, who hailed from a blend of Gallic and Muslim heritage to royal status holds significant import. This move was underpinned by his active engagement in overseeing the affairs of Wollo, ultimately granting him the title of *Negus* of the Wollo.

In the context of the First World War, allied diplomats in Addis Ababa were also concerned about the direction Ethiopia was taking and demanded clarifications<sup>119</sup>.

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibi*, p323-324. (transl). «Only Menelik's great prestige and the authority that came from it [...] had for the time of his reign greatly reduced the influence of the feudal chiefs: now they, in the face of a young and weak sovereign [...] raised their heads and imposed themselves on the Crown». A note about Menelik's prestige.

<sup>118</sup> Nicolosi, G. (2002). *Imperialismo e resistenza in Corno d'Africa. Mohammed Abdullah Hassan e il derviscismo somalo (1899-1920)*. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino Editore, 265. «In realtà. Non è del tutto chiaro quanto Lijig Iyasu sentisse in profondità l'attaccamento alla fede islamica, nonostante sia certo che in quel periodo egli optò marcatamente per una vicinanza con quegli ambienti». (transl).”Actually. It is not entirely clear how deeply Lijig Iyasu felt his attachment to the Islamic faith, although it is certain that in that period he opted markedly for closeness to those environments”.

<sup>119</sup> Abbink, Jon, cit., 116.

Scoppiata la guerra europea, il giovane negus neghesti «lavorato» dagli imperi centrali e dalla Turchia, si avvicinò vieppiù all'islam e commise il grave errore di assumere atteggiamento ostile agli Alleati sognando la costituzione di un grande stato musulmano<sup>120</sup> nell'Africa Orientale che comprendesse anche le Colonie inglesi, francesi e italiane. Errore che gli fu fatale.<sup>121</sup>

After this period of disputed rule, the Christian aristocracy in Scioa reinstated its authority with conviction. Menelik's daughter, Zewditu, ascended to the throne as Empress, and the governance of the empire was effectively overseen by *Ras* Tafari Makonnen. *Ras* Tafari held the title of Crown Prince and occupied the position of plenipotentiary regent during this significant era of Ethiopian history..

The scioan leaders, supported by Triple Entente, led to the *coup d'état* of 27 September 1916, with the consequent fall of *Ligg* Yasu and the proclamation as Empress of Ethiopia of *Uizerò* Zewditu (1876-1930), the last daughter of Menelik. *Ligg* Yasu's father *Negus* Micael was captured in 1921 and confined to the fortress of Salalé. The *coup d'état* that unfolded on the 27th of September in 1916, orchestrated in collaboration with *Abuna*<sup>122</sup> Matteos, culminated in the

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<sup>120</sup> Lovejoy, E. (2019). *Storia della schiavitù in Africa*. Milano: Bompiani, 118-119. It is recalled that the Muslim presence in Ethiopia dates to the 16th century, when several Muslim states had established themselves in the savannah region and the so-called *jihad* threatened the destruction of Christian Ethiopia, creating a strong Islamic state in the Ethiopian plateau. But the desired effect was not such: the state construction was not solid and the political disintegration of the few remaining Muslim principalities here took place.

<sup>121</sup> Nicolosi, G., cit., 265. (transl). "When the European war broke out, the young negus neghesti "worked" from the central empires and Turkey, came closer and closer to Islam and made the serious mistake of taking a hostile attitude to the Allies dreaming of the constitution of a great Muslim state in East Africa that would also include the English, French and Italian colonies. An error that was fatal for him". A note about the fatal error of *Negus Neghesti*.

<sup>122</sup> See glossary.

ascent of Zewditu, the youngest daughter of Menelik, to the throne. This occurrence stands as a remarkable deviation from the established dynastic norms of the Imperial House. A notable infringement upon tradition, it contrasts with the precedent set by the last Queen, Macheda, also known as the Queen of Sheba, who elected a female ruler only in the absence of a male heir. It is worth noting that Menelik's uncles boasted a significant male progeny. Notwithstanding, two exceptions were made to this rule: the initial exception being the selection of a queen, and the subsequent exception being the appointment of the Vicar and Regent of the Empire, *Deggia*<sup>123</sup> Tafari Makonnen, who held the status of Heir to the Throne. He traced his lineage through the maternal line to Menelik's forebearer, Sahlè Selassie, and was the son of *Ras* Makonnen.

With regard to matters concerning state consolidation, Narok outlined three conceivable avenues in 1936:

Tre vie si presentavano all'Etiopia di Tafari per cercare di superare la crisi che il contatto con il mondo civile aveva inesorabilmente creato: spalancare le porte dell'impero alla civiltà col rischio quasi inevitabile di andare incontro a violente e disordinate scosse interne fatali alla dinastia e alla stessa unità del paese; sollecitare o accogliere la collaborazione intima con un paese civile attraverso la forma [...] del protettorato, ovvero attraverso altri sistemi che la fertile immaginazione diplomatica e giuridica dei tempi moderni non avrebbe mancato di escogitare; tentare un'opera di autorigenerazione, necessariamente lentissima [...], e tenere frattanto a bada la civiltà impaziente alle porte del paese, frenandone le esigenze, ostacolandone l'impeto, combattendola se del caso, programma destinato a priori all'insuccesso [...].<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> See glossary.

<sup>124</sup> Narok. (1936). Appunti storici sull' Etiopia: «Il Regno di Tafari». *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 3(1/2), 47. (transl.) "Three ways were presented to Tafari's Ethiopia to try to overcome the crisis that the contact with the civilized world had inexorably created: to open the doors of the empire to civilization with the almost inevitable risk of encountering violent and

Tafari (1892-1975) opted for the latter approach, with his overarching goal being a process of self-renewal. Following the *coup d'état* on the 27th of September in 1916, the reins of power were placed in his hands. However, due to internal political considerations, this authority was concurrently shared with Empress Zewditu (1876-1930). Tafari held the position of Vicar, consequently serving as the Regent.

This juncture marked the intersection of two distinct political ideologies: Zewditu embodied a conventional, orthodox, and conservative policy orientation, while Tafari championed modernization and pursued a policy geared towards innovation. Zewditu could count on the support of the clergy, a notably potent and influential component of Ethiopian culture, as well as the backing of influential feudal lords. In contrast, Tafari garnered endorsement from foreign diplomatic missions and the so-called *giovani Etiopici*, “young Ethiopians”, a faction comprising individuals who had studied abroad or within Ethiopia itself, often at Religious Missions. These individuals, while under the illusion of having become Europeanized, held aspirations of imbuing their country with European characteristics<sup>125</sup>.

The succession of imperial rule ignited discussions regarding the governance of the Empire: preceding leaders had pursued a path of modernization within the nation, and Menelik (1844-1913) introduced the concept known as modern administration and military expansion<sup>126</sup>.

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disorderly internal shocks fatal to the dynasty and to the unity of the country itself; to solicit or welcome intimate collaboration with a civilized country through the form [...] of the protectorate, or through other systems that the fertile diplomatic and legal imagination of modern times would not fail to devise; to attempt a work of self-regeneration, necessarily very slow [...], and in the meantime to keep at bay the impatient civilization at the gates of the country, holding back its needs, hindering its impetus, fighting it if necessary, a programme destined a priori to failure [...]”. A note about the three ways described by Narok in 1936.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibi*, 48.

<sup>126</sup> Milkias and Metaferia G., *The Battle of Adwa - Reflections on Ethiopia's historic victory against European colonialism*, 2005, in <https://www.sahistory.org>, 183. « Major decisions at Menelik's court were based on consultation and deliberation. The nobles, religious leaders, and dignitaries were consulted when decisions on important national policies were made. The role of Empress

[...] the reigns of Emperors Yohannes IV (1837-1889) and Menelik II (1844-1913) represented an important era of modernisation in Ethiopia. [...]. Both rulers believed that modernisation, particularly in the military field, was essential for their country's survival.<sup>127</sup>

Through tactful diplomacy, Tafari strategically expanded his personal territories and bolstered his armed forces. He merged the Harar and Wollo fiefdoms, extending his influence even into Italian-controlled Dancalia, a crucial political stronghold in central-northern Ethiopia<sup>128</sup>. He leveraged existing rivalries among local leaders, such as in Tigray, where three factions vied for control.

A decisive moment arose on September 5, 1928, when differences in political vision led to a *coup d'état* attempt by the imperial guard at Menelik's Mausoleum. The Empress, unaware of the discontent, called upon *Ras* Cassa Darghié of Scioa for aid, quelling the uprising. While Tafari refrained from direct action to maintain stability amid existing fragility - including *Ligg* Yasu's surrender and the Empress's Court officials' dismissal - he strategically secured the title of *Negus* and had "plenipotentiary" appended to his Regent title, preemptively curbing future revolts.

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Taytu is recorded to have been very prominent. Menelik heeded the advice of his councillors; [...]. Menelik's administration was elaborate and achieved several "firsts" in the recent history of Ethiopia. He was instrumental in introducing modern technologies such as the telephone and telegraph. He also introduced state supported secular education, modern administration, and social and military services. He established the first cabinet posts in Ethiopia's history, put in use a printing press that produced the first regular periodicals, pamphlets, newspapers (*Aemiro* and *Goh*) and other documents (as well as religious pieces), and set up a mint that produced coins».

<sup>127</sup> Pankhurst R. (2004). *Economic change in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ethiopia: a period of accelerated innovation*. *Annales d'Éthiopie*, vol. XX, 195.

<sup>128</sup> Narok, cit., 49. (transl).Narok defined it as a " fundamental political basis".



Il 27 settembre (1928) il Governo etiopico comunicava ufficialmente alle Legazioni estere di Addis Abeba che l'Erede al Trono e Reggente plenipotenziario dell'Impero [...] era stato nominato negus d'Etiopia. [...] alla presenza dell'intero Corpo Diplomatico e dei governatori della Colonia Eritrea, della Costa francese dei Somali e della Somalia inglese appositamente invitati<sup>129</sup>.

Upon his appointment as *Negus*, Tafari ascended beyond even the most senior and esteemed *Ras* within the empire. Antagonism towards him escalated into significant incursions following his 1929 coronation, extending into the Danakil and Abyssinian lowlands, bordering the Eritrean Colony. These campaigns, however, proved futile due to subpar organization, lack of local support, and minimal expeditionary fervour. Many shepherds migrated to the Eritrean Colony, sparking repeated border clashes. Since *Ligg* Yasu's removal, the central government faced unprecedented peril, with uprisings permeating the central Amara and eastern plateau regions<sup>130</sup>.

In questo episodio della storia e della vita interna etiopica [...] si rivela appieno l'ambiente politico interno di quel paese, nel quale i maggiori feudatari (e rispettivamente i minori), non agivano se non nel loro esclusivo interesse, ispirando atteggiamenti e decisioni solo ed unicamente alla propria ambizione o almeno al proprio tornaconto, alla innata gelosia degli uni e degli altri, al timore del più forte o del più

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibi*, p51-52. (transl). «On 27 September (1928) the Ethiopian Government officially informed the Foreign Legations of Addis Ababa that the Heir to the Throne and Plenipotentiary Regent of the Empire [...] had been appointed negus of Ethiopia. [...] in the presence of the entire Diplomatic Corps and the governors of the Eritrean Colony, of the French Somali coast and of the English Somalia invited for the purpose». A note about the Coronation.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibi*, p52-55.

scaltro, alla diffidenza verso tutti; donde l'intrigo, la facilità nel promettere e nel non mantenere, l'insorgere col più violento furore e il sottomettersi col più persuasivo dei sorrisi, le sperticate proteste di lealtà e i subdoli tradimenti”<sup>131</sup>.

Through the battle of Zebit, the foremost among the influential feudal leaders was vanquished. The remaining chiefs, characterized by uncertainty and trepidation, swiftly demonstrated their allegiance to the regent and earnestly engaged in effective combat against the raiders this time<sup>132</sup>. Regrettably, the Empress, grappling with a severe bout of diabetes potentially exacerbated by poisoning, succumbed. On November 2nd, *Negus* Tafari Makonnen (1892-1975) was officially declared *Negus Neghesti*<sup>133</sup> of Ethiopia, adopting the appellation Haile Selassie, symbolizing “Strength of the Trinity”<sup>134</sup>.

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibi*, 56. (transl).”In this episode of Ethiopian history and internal life [...] the internal political environment of that country is fully revealed, in which the major feudal lords (and respectively the minors) did not act except in their exclusive interest, inspiring attitudes and decisions solely and exclusively to their own ambition or at least to their own benefit, to the innate jealousy of one or the other, to the fear of the strongest or the shrewdest, to distrust of all; hence the intrigue, the ease in promising and not keeping, the rising with the most violent fury and the submission with the most persuasive of smiles, the hoped-for protests of loyalty and devious betrayals”. A note about Ethiopian internal politics.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibidem*. (transl).”uncertain and fearful, they hastened to “prove” their loyalty to the Regent and to fight, this time seriously and therefore effectively the raiders”. A note about chiefs.

<sup>133</sup> Etiopia. (1953). In *Enciclopedia Motta* (1st. ed., Vol. 2, 808). Milano: Federico Motta Editore. «Morta nel 1930 Zauditù, Tafari si proclamò imperatore col nome di Hailé Selassié ed iniziò contro le colonie italiane atti di ostilità che provocarono la guerra italo-etiopica (1935-1936) conclusasi con la nostra occupazione (5 maggio 1936) di Addis Abebà, la capitale, e del paese».

<sup>134</sup> Narok, cit. 57. «Il 2 novembre 1930, alla presenza dei maggiori feudatari dell'impero, di tutto il Corpo Diplomatico e Consolare accreditato in Addis Abeba, e di speciali Missioni estere appositamente invitate e convenute, Hailè Selassié veniva consacrato Negus Neghesti dallo Abuna Cirillo. Rappresentavano l'Italia S.A.R. Ferdinando di Savoia Principe di Udine (poi Duca di Genova), l'Inghilterra S.A.R. il Duca di Gloucester, la Francia il Maresciallo Franchet d'Espérey [...] Stati Uniti, la Germania, il Belgio, la Svezia, la Grecia, il Giappone, la Turchia, l'Egitto».

[...] gli anni Venti portarono all’Africa un simulacro di pace, che permea i libri di storia e i resoconti del tempo di un senso di stabilità. [...]. Alla pace contribuì anche la nuova mappa dell’Africa. La spartizione coloniale aveva semplificato i rapporti politici all’interno del continente. dove prima vi erano [...] regni e imperi dai confini mutevoli e indeterminati, ora rimanevano una cinquantina di Stati con frontiere e capitali stabili. [...] la colonizzazione aveva diviso molte comunità [...] ma contribuì anche alla pace del continente. Quasi tutte le guerre scoppiate in Africa dopo il periodo coloniale sono state combattute all’interno di frontiere nazionali e non fra Stati vicini. La pace e la sicurezza favorirono l’attività economica e sociale e la mobilità fisica all’interno delle colonie, stimolando il diffondersi di nuove idee, nuove tecniche, nuovi gusti e abitudini, che accelerarono il passo della modernizzazione in tutto il continente.<sup>135</sup>

*Ras* Makonnen represented a stark departure from *Yasu* in nearly all aspects of life and political philosophy. Being the offspring of *Ras* Makonnen, the conqueror and governor of Harar, his lineage and perspectives were intrinsically tied to the policy of Christian dominion over Muslim-held territories. To advance this agenda, he actively advocated for the resettlement of Christian military personnel within Muslim regions. Meanwhile, Ethiopian

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<sup>135</sup> Reader, J. (2017). *Africa. Biografia di un continente*. Mondadori, 609-610. (transl). “Peace. After centuries of cruel ordeal culminating in the devastation of the First World War, the 1920s brought Africa a simulacrum of peace, permeating history books and time accounts with a sense of stability. [...]. The new map of Africa also contributed to peace. The colonial partition had simplified political relations within the continent. Where before there were [...] kingdoms and empires with changing and indeterminate borders, there now remained about fifty states with stable borders and capitals. [...] colonization had divided many communities [...] but it also contributed to the peace of the continent. Almost all the wars that broke out in Africa after the colonial period were fought within national borders and not between neighbouring states. Peace and security favored economic and social activity and physical mobility within the colonies, stimulating the spread of new ideas, new techniques, new tastes and habits, which accelerated the pace of modernization throughout the continent”.

Muslims appeared to have acquiesced to their subordinate status, viewing it as an inherent aspect of the established order. This acceptance can be attributed to the rigorous military control imposed upon them, effectively suppressing any potential expressions of dissent. This period marked a notable transformation in Ethiopia's governance approach, driven by intricate interplays of religious and political dynamics under *Ras* Makonnen's leadership.

Assuming power in 1930, Haile Selassie emerged as the singular authority at the heart of the government. His primary concern was initially to expand his own authority and subsequently to establish control over the realm. Similar to his predecessors, he had inherited a fiefdom, in his case, that of Harar. Previous rulers, such as Yohannes of Tigray and Menelik (1884-1913) of Scioa, were entitled to their respective fiefdoms. Whenever a new *Negus Neghesti*<sup>136</sup>, or Emperor, ascended to the throne, it often necessitated a comprehensive overhaul of the administrative structure. Unfortunately, this process frequently led to socio-political instability within the country, resulting in what Narok in 1936 aptly termed as "often serious and bloody political upheavals". The social hierarchy in Ethiopia plays a crucial role in comprehending the simultaneous existence of instability and political stability in the country. At the apex of this hierarchy sits the *Negus Neghesti*, the Emperor. Below the Emperor, there are the regional *Negus* who rule over the major principalities, often inheriting their positions. Further down are the *Ras*, responsible for overseeing significant regions, and the *Deggiacc*, who govern smaller provinces<sup>137</sup>.

In each region, the *Negus* had the responsibility of governance, and many princely families retained their feuds and powers. These families often garnered support from the local population and the clergy. Feuds could also emerge from issues related to royal investitures, and it was common for families to share control rather than dividing the feud outright, which is known as "quote di comando" in Italian. It's worth noting that the primary source of wealth for

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<sup>136</sup> See glossary.

<sup>137</sup> It's important to note that the allocation of administrative authority by the *Negus*, or regional rulers, was often arbitrary and did not necessarily imply allegiance to the *Negus Neghesti*.

these families was taxation<sup>138</sup>, so imperial appointments to administrative roles could significantly impact their quality of life, ranging from prosperity to destitution. In order to dismantle this longstanding structure that had defined Abyssinian society for centuries, Haile Selassie faced a dilemma with two potential courses of action. He could either federalize the empire through a new constitution that would consolidate and empower individual local dynasties, promoting genuine cooperation and loyal subordination, or he could opt to de-feudalize the empire by eliminating feudal powers. This presented a vexing predicament that weighed heavily on the political and social life of the country, as it stood at a crossroads between preserving tradition or modernizing the nation<sup>139</sup>. Unfortunately, considering Ethiopia's history and this initial analysis,

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<sup>138</sup> Pankhurst, R. (1961). *An introduction to the economic history of Ethiopia, from early times to 1800*. London: Lalibela House, 135. « The most unifying factor in land tenure was the granting of land by the sovereign on the basis of service. Such grants had their roots in economic and social conditions and were essential to the whole system of government. The existence of a large and highly developed hierarchy necessitated an extensive system of tribute, taxation, and rent, which in view of the primary subsistence character of the economy and the absence of agriculture slavery, could be met only by payments in kind and certain types of services. The granting of land was similarly almost the only way in which rulers could remunerate or reward their followers, servants and favorites or provide for monasteries, churches, and persons in need».

<sup>139</sup> Milkias P. and Metaferia G., cit., 284-285. «Two contradictory aspects of the Ethiopian ruling elites' ideological conceptions of Ethiopians are worth considering. The first is that which, contrary to the experience of Adwa and all the historical evidence, treats Ethiopians as a homogeneous population. This simplification was the basis of the Emperor Haile Selassie's and the Derg's destructive policies of centralization that denied the diversity expressed in the regional embodiment of Ethiopian political life. Under Haile Selassie, this led to the abolition of the Ethiopian-Eritrean federation and to the repression of demands for autonomy in Gojam, Tigray, the Ogaden, and Bale, all historically defined regions. Forced centralization was pursued by the Derg with even more destructive zeal. And yet, the sort of "feudal federalism" of historically defined regions that was at the basis of the national unity that made Adwa possible shows that centralization and homogenization are not prerequisites for national identity and unity. The sense of Ethiopian identity at Adwa emerged through the recognition of the region — based nature of the Ethiopian polity. The second aspect is that which denies the historical existence of a commonly shared Ethiopian political, economic and cultural space and treats Ethiopia as a mere aggregate of discrete ethnic groups. This simplification is the basis of the ethnic essentialism that has led to the EPRDF's ethnicization of space, history, and politics. Here also, the experience of

it becomes evident that the Negus Neghesti could not solely rely on individuals he trusted for administration, as this would inevitably invite accusations of nepotism and favouritism in state affairs.

Consequently, the only viable solution was to curb the influence of these families and local dynasties. While the *Negus Neghesti* may not have possessed boundless strength and authority, an urgent and substantial issue loomed on the horizon: the pressures of modernization, commonly referred to as “pressione di civiltà” or the pressure of civilization<sup>140</sup>.

European colonialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was undeniably a destructive social, political, and economic force. However, one of the great ironies of European empire is that far from disrupting this connectivity among believers, imperial rule in many ways enhanced it.<sup>141</sup>

This situation paved the way for Christian Amhara-Tegreans migrants and European missions to enter these regions, further facilitating the conversion of the Oromo in Choa and Wallagga to Orthodoxy<sup>142</sup>. Menelik’s conquest did not

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Adwa shows that ethnic essentialism is alien to the self-understanding of Ethiopians, for the successful mobilization of various ethnicities into a single national resistance movement. [...] Historically then, the “internal” battle of Adwa revolving around the issues of freedom, equality and social justice is far from settled. It is time then to set aside Adwa as a victory over an external enemy and rethink it as an unfinished battle against the internal enemies that keep the people of Ethiopia in bondage».

<sup>140</sup> Narok, cit., p. 60.

<sup>141</sup> Reese, S. S., cit., 20.

<sup>142</sup> Gascon, A. & Hirsch, B., cit., 694-695.

stop the progression of Islam in the southwest and Hararge<sup>143</sup>; in fact, it was encouraged by the Italian occupiers.

Throughout the 20th century, Ethiopia was already characterized by a structural division into two distinct zones, which can be metaphorically envisioned as vertical bands. The western region, predominantly Christian, featured prominently visible churches established by Menelik's lieutenants<sup>144</sup>. In contrast, the eastern region appeared predominantly Muslim, with merchants and artisans originating from Yemen, and exhibited only a sparse presence of visible structures reminiscent of mosques or *madrasas*<sup>145</sup>.

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<sup>143</sup> The area primarily encompassed the land that was part of the Emirate of Harar, which Menelik II annexed in 1887, with Harar serving as its capital.

<sup>144</sup> Gascon, A. & Hirsch, B., cit., 695.

<sup>145</sup> In Muslim countries, an educational institution for intermediate and higher studies in Islamic jurisprudence and religious sciences; it specifically teaches the Quran and *ḥadīth*, a brief descriptions of events or sayings related to the Prophet.

## Chapter 2 - Slavery and Slave Trade in Ethiopia since 1900

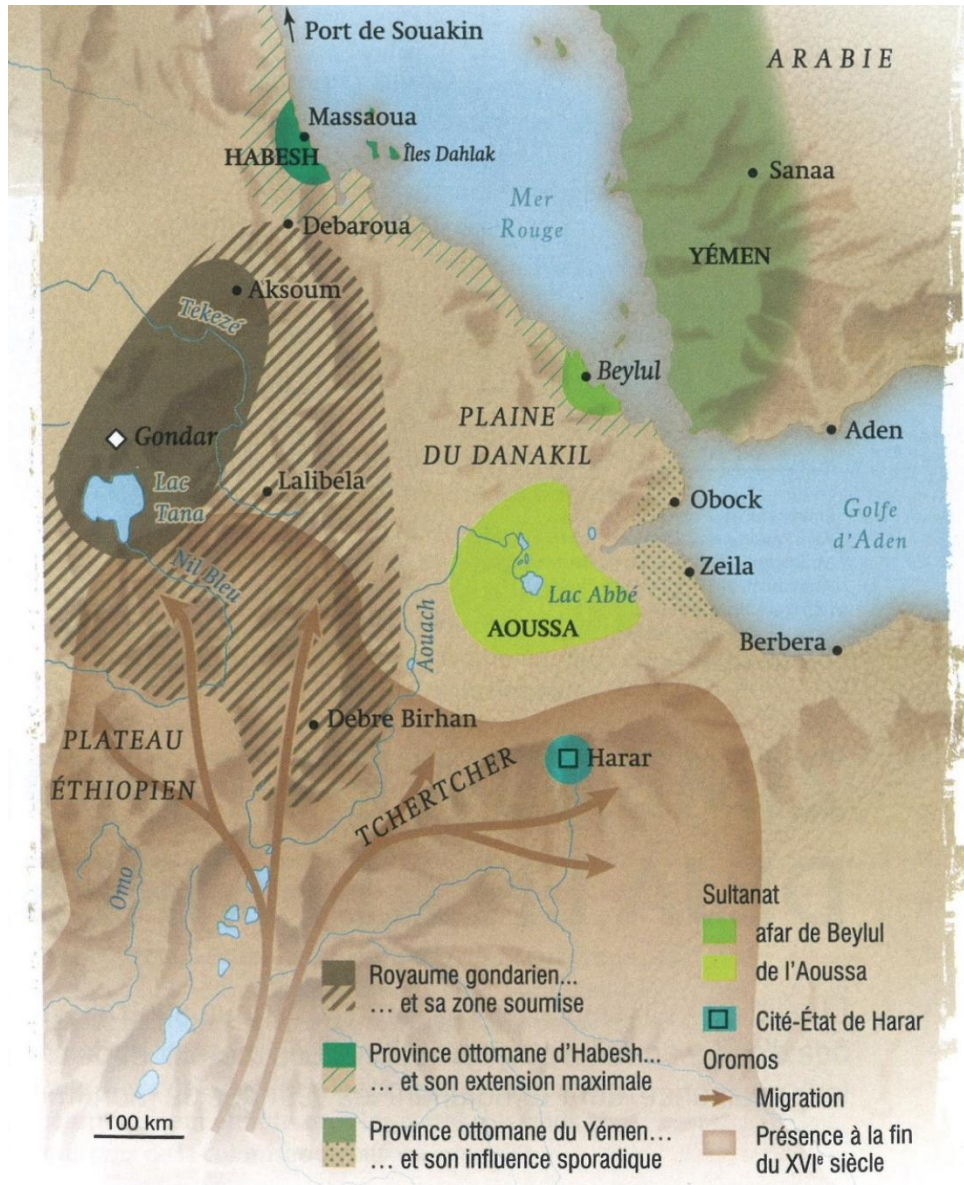


Figure 2.1 – Le royaume Gondarien XVII<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle

The physical connection of African Muslims to the broader community of believers has deep historical roots and encompasses various overlapping dynamics. While Christians have had a longstanding presence in the Ethiopian



region, African Muslim believers reached Ethiopia through the initial *hijra* <sup>146</sup>, as analyzed in the first chapter. Travel holds a profound place in Islamic tradition, associating the act of traveling not only with economic gain but also with spiritual purpose, forging a historically deep bond with the *umma* <sup>147</sup>, the Muslim community.

The migration of Muslims from the commercial society of Mecca led to the emergence of trading empires such as those in medieval West Sudan, the Swahili trading cities of East Africa, and the consolidation of strong commercial entities within the Ethiopian territory <sup>148</sup>. As illustrated in the map presented above, movements in the Horn of Africa during the Gondarine monarchy witnessed flows of migrants towards the sultanates of Aoussa, Beyful, and the city-state of Harar.

While European colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries undoubtedly had destructive social, political, and economic impacts, it paradoxically did not disrupt connectivity among believers; rather, it fortified it. European presence contributed to the physical expansion of Muslim communities, and the development of increasingly rapid and affordable means of communication and transportation brought more believers and potential believers into contact with each other, both physically and intellectually.

With the rise of European empires in the 19th century, many more Muslims, including Africans, took advantage of the networks established by these empires, creating a more horizontally integrated community of believers that transcended geographical barriers. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 significantly increased Muslim mobility across various European colonial empires.

With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1867, which was officially inaugurated on November 17, 1869, the Red Sea became even more central as a

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<sup>146</sup> See glossary.

<sup>147</sup> See glossary.

<sup>148</sup> Reese, S. S. (2014). Islam in Africa / Africans and Islam. *The Journal of African History*, 55(1), 17–26.

swift maritime route to the Indian Ocean. This historical event significantly enhanced the connectivity<sup>149</sup> between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, thereby greatly facilitating trade and exchanges. From the 1880s onward, European influence in the region continued to grow. Missionaries, explorers, and merchants from Europe penetrated deep into the interior of this African region, fostering increased interaction between Europe and the lands of East Africa.

Moreover, advancements in print technology, particularly the lithographic steam press, revolutionized the accessibility of knowledge among Muslims. This led to the production and dissemination of religious texts and periodicals in regions like East Africa, shedding light on local Muslim communities' concerns and their engagement with broader issues impacting the global community of believers. The religious texts serve as a common spiritual anchor that unites Muslims across Africa and the wider Islamic world. The Quran, believed by Muslims to be the literal word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, is central to Islamic faith and practice. It provides guidance on matters of faith, morality, and daily life, and its recitation is an integral part of Muslim worship. The *Hadith*<sup>150</sup>, which consists of the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, serves as a supplementary source of guidance and interpretation of

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<sup>149</sup> Until the mid-nineteenth century, the only maritime route connecting Europe with the Orient was the route around the Cape of Good Hope. Maritime trade through the Red Sea was relatively marginal, primarily due to the need for transshipment of goods overland, which significantly limited its scope and efficiency. The East India Company, particularly for postal services, employed this method. Ships traveling from India would arrive at Suez, where goods and passengers were transhipped and sent overland to Alexandria. From there, Peninsular and Oriental (P&O) steamships would depart for Dover via Gibraltar or the port of Marseille. The final leg of the journey involved overland travel through the English Channel to reach home. For a period ranging from one hundred days to six months, sailing vessels in the nineteenth century typically took to complete the journey from England to India, circumnavigating the Cape of Good Hope. This remained the norm until November 17, 1869, when the Suez Canal was officially inaugurated. This event marked the beginning of a maritime route that would profoundly reshape global communication networks, transforming the Red Sea into one of the principal arteries of the world economy and a strategically vital point on the planet.

<sup>150</sup> See *glossary*.

the Quran. Muslims look to these texts for moral and ethical guidance, shaping their beliefs and actions accordingly.

Shared religious practices, such as daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca, further strengthen the bonds among African Muslims and their global co-religionists. The five daily prayers are a fundamental act of worship, and they serve as a unifying ritual observed by Muslims around the world. During Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn to sunset, an act of self-discipline and spiritual reflection that creates a sense of communal solidarity among believers. The pilgrimage to Mecca, known as *hajj*, is one of the Five Pillars of Islam and is an obligation for every capable Muslim. It brings together millions of Muslims from diverse backgrounds, reinforcing their sense of belonging to the larger Muslim community, or *umma*.

In addition to these core religious practices, there are also shared ethical principles and values that guide the conduct of Muslims, including concepts of justice, compassion, and generosity. These shared religious foundations and practices create a sense of belonging and connection among African Muslims and their counterparts across the globe, fostering a sense of unity within the *umma*.

In many cases, the conversion of sub-Saharan Africans was likely a means to protect themselves from being sold as slaves. For rulers, who were not active proselytizers, conversion remained rather formal, perhaps a gesture aimed at garnering political support from the Arabs and facilitating trade relations. Sub-Saharan Africans developed their own type of Islam, often referred to as “African Islam” with brotherhoods and specific practices<sup>151</sup>. The interaction among African Muslims in the Horn of Africa has maintained strong ties to their roots, a connection sustained by the extensive caravan routes that spanned from the Horn of Africa to Arabia and vice versa. It’s noteworthy that even though Christians in Ethiopia typically expressed some reservations about engaging in commerce, a small number of Christian traders did emerge over time.

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<sup>151</sup> Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Trade and the Spread of Islam in Africa*, 2001, <https://www.metmuseum.org>.

Nevertheless, it's important to emphasize that the trade routes in Ethiopia were predominantly under the control of Muslim merchants. This dynamic exchange of goods, culture, and ideas along these historic routes played a significant role in shaping the cultural and economic landscape of the region.

In the current scholarly landscape, it is important to acknowledge the significant contribution made by Aurélia Michel's work. Her book *Il bianco e il negro indagine storica sull'ordine razzista*<sup>152</sup> examines the role that slavery has played in shaping the modern world and its enduring influence in contemporary societies. Over the course of nearly five centuries, Aurélia Michel traces the key developments from Mediterranean slavery to African and Atlantic slavery, culminating in the European colonization processes across various continents. Her research provides essential historical insights into the construction of racial hierarchies, unveiling their economic, anthropological, and political underpinnings. By engaging with concepts of freedom, equality, labor, and our own identities, the history of slavery exposes the racial order that continues to govern our world.

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<sup>152</sup> Michel A. & Zini V. (2021). *Il bianco e il negro: indagine storica sull'ordine razzista*. Torino: Einaudi, *passim*.

## 2.1 Caravan routes and slave markets at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Commerce was traditionally based on two main institutions: firstly, the local market, which was to be found in every village, great or small, where trade was mainly short distance and conducted between peasants and other producers of the area; and, secondly, commercial caravans, chiefly composed of Arabs and Ethiopian Muslims who controlled long distance trade, including the import-export business, and travelled from market to market following clearly defined trade routes.<sup>153</sup>

In the early 1900s, trade in Ethiopia was organized through local market institutions, which were part of a broader commercial system supported by trade routes connecting local markets throughout the region. These trade routes were facilitated by caravans that traversed the area. Goods were transported<sup>154</sup> over long distances using mules, which were ridden only by the wealthier individuals, as well as donkeys, porters, and even camels in the plains. The leader of the caravan hired not only muleteers, typically members of moderately well-off families<sup>155</sup>, but also porters, who were often slaves. If they were free, they received compensation ranging from 2 to 4 Maria Theresa dollars for a journey of approximately 500 kilometers. Large caravans, such as those from Gondar to Massawa, often took up to five months to complete their journey, although it could be easily accomplished by unburdened travelers in about twenty days. This information elucidates how caravan journeys were not of short duration and

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<sup>153</sup> Pankhurst, R. (1963). Ethiopian Monetary and Banking Innovations in the Nineteenth Centuries. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 1, 2, *passim*.

<sup>154</sup> Pankhurst, R. (1961). Transport and Communications in Ethiopia, 1835-1935, *Journal of Transport History* 5, 2, *passim*

<sup>155</sup> Griaule, M. (1931). Le Travail en Abyssinie. *Revue Internationale du Travail* 13, 14.

often followed a specific pattern: the “great merchant” would announce the journey in advance, allowing smaller traders from his own region to position themselves alongside the caravan with tents and all necessary supplies. The great merchant would choose the locations, intervene in disputes, set the departure time, and arrange for security personnel. They also took on the responsibility of paying the taxes along the route, which were then divided equally among the participants. Caravans typically set out at dawn and stopped around noon at a location with access to water and pasture. Isolated areas were often chosen as halting places to avoid potential conflicts with local populations. Travelers were thus obliged to carry everything they might need, including food supplies. It was a customary practice for the local population to provide hospitality to strangers, but transportation difficulties remained a significant inconvenience for trade.

Despite the myriad challenges posed by communication limitations, Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa boasted a plethora of markets interconnected by a complex network of trade routes. Among these routes, the most prominent and well-documented were intricately linked to import-export commerce. These trade arteries facilitated connections between major urban centers and consumption hubs such as Gondar, Adwa and Harar. These urban nodes were interconnected with the primary seaports including Massawa, Tajurah, Zeila, Berbera, Mogadishu - later extending to Assab and Djibouti -, as well as with Sudan and the affluent regions responsible for the production of gold, civet, and coffee in the southwestern territories.

In the region, several markets, and fairs, too, served as crucial focal points for the interaction between merchants, enslaved individuals, and even different religious traditions. The market served as the fundamental institution of trade throughout the country and typically fairs occurred once a week <sup>156</sup> on specific days, varying from one village to another. Among these markets, Gondar, Gimma, Gojjam, Scioa, Harar, Gondar and Adwa stood out, embodying the essence of this intricate web of exchanges.

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<sup>156</sup> This scheduling allowed traveling merchants to engage in trade for a significant portion of the week.

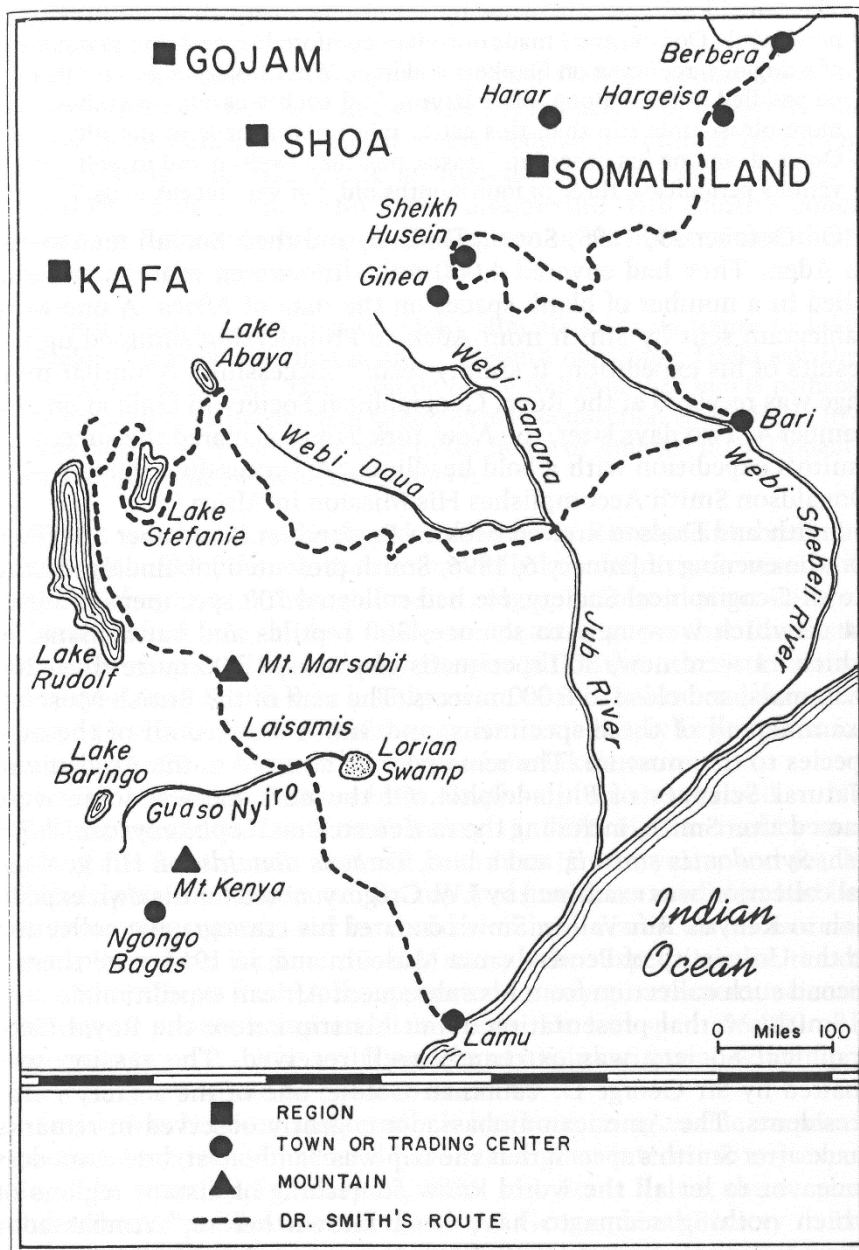


Figure 2.2 – Arthur Donaldson Smith's route during his 1894-1895 journey to Lake Rudolf

The trade in the north-western region of Ethiopia had historically centered around the city of Gondar, which served as the capital at various times. However, the fortunes of Gondar experienced significant fluctuations due to

political factors, as evidenced by population estimates recorded by foreign visitors. Despite enduring civil wars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Gondar remained a prominent city in northern Ethiopia. Nevertheless, its significance gradually diminished in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This decline was attributed, in part, to Gondar losing its status as the capital of the realm and, additionally, to its destruction, first by Theodore in 1864 and later by the Dervishes in 1887.

Gondar played a crucial role in serving as the terminal for numerous caravans arriving from both Massawa and the Sudan. Furthermore, it had substantial interactions with the fertile lands situated to the south of the Blue Nile. In the 1860s, Stern estimated that the city's export trade, conducted via the Red Sea and Sudan, amounted to 60,000 Maria Theresa dollars. Imports into Gondar encompassed a diverse range of commodities, with key staples including white, blue, and red calicoes, coarse muslins, chintz, cotton velvets, common cutlery, glass beads, and Indian spices. Stern noted that while a small portion of the imported goods were acquired by prominent chiefs, the king, and stall-keepers at various markets, the majority of these imports were dispatched to Gojam. There, the Gallas from the southern regions engaged in trade, exchanging their gold, civet, ivory, and coffee for the products originating from India and the manufactured goods of England and Germany. The profits generated from these trade activities were reported to be substantial<sup>157</sup>.

The Gondar-Adwa-Massawa trade route <sup>158</sup> is the primary trade artery emanating from Gondar extended through Adwa and culminated at Massawa, a critical coastal hub. This vital trade route served as the nexus connecting various Ethiopian provinces, including Bagemdir, Oojam, Amhara, and the Sudan, with Tigray and beyond, encompassing distant territories. The historical knowledge of trade in southern Ethiopia is relatively recent compared to the well-documented trade in the northern and central provinces. Documentation

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<sup>157</sup> Naretti, J. (1879). *Abissinie. L' exploration*, 123-4

<sup>158</sup> Trimingham, J. S. (1969). *Islam in Africa*. New York: James Kritzeck and William H. Lewis eds., 66-68.



regarding the southern region <sup>159</sup> remained limited until the latter part of the nineteenth century.

In the early 19th century, Henry Salt documented a significant flow of iron from Walqayit and Sennar to Tigray, where it was employed in the production of knives in Adwa. Subsequently, Combes and Tamisier, a generation later, noted the reciprocal nature of trade, with Bagemdir, Oojam, and Amhara supplying Tigray with fine cloth, livestock, including horses, mules, goats, and cows, hides and skins, and coffee. In return, Tigray provided rock salt, coarse cloth, and imported goods, particularly silks, swords, and firearms. This dynamic exchange continued, as evidenced by the Earl of Mayo's observations in 1876, citing the transportation of cotton from Walqayit to Tigray via substantial caravans that returned laden with grain, salt, and other commodities.

The journey undertaken by merchants traveling from Gondar to Adwa predominantly occurred during the dry season. Rüppell reported that, starting in early October, a substantial number of caravans, primarily composed of laden mules, embarked from Gondar towards Tigray.

Observations by the French scientific mission of the 1840s and other explorers shed light on the seasonal nuances of this trade. Caravans departed from Gondar at various times throughout the year, with the largest departures taking place in January after the rains and in June, just prior to their onset. Additionally, reports from explorers like Heuglin, Munzlinger, and Stern offered insights into the timing of river crossings, especially the Takazé river, and the impact of seasonal flooding on travel.

Accounts by Alamanni from subsequent generations estimated the composition of caravans departing annually from Gondar to the coast. These caravans included approximately five large groups consisting of 20 to 30 professional merchants, 40 to 50 porters, 100 mules, and 70 to 80 donkeys, along

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<sup>159</sup> Pankhurst, R. (1965). The Trade of Southern and Western Ethiopia and the Indian Ocean Ports in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 3(2), 37-74.

with seven to eight medium-sized caravans comprising 6 to 8 merchants, 10 to 12 porters, 20 to 30 mules, and 10 to 20 donkeys.

The route taken by these merchants displayed a degree of flexibility, influenced by several factors. Rüppell detailed the prevalent route through Wàgara, Dabarek, and Lalmalmo, culminating in Adwa, where rest was sought before the final leg of the journey to the coast. However, during times of conflict in Semén or Wagara, traders often redirected their route northwards via Walqayit. Conversely, if the northern route was obstructed, they opted for a more challenging path southward across the Semén mountains, subsequently traversing Agamé. While these routes were generally adhered to throughout the century, Heuglin noted that, during periods of safety, caravans tended to split to avoid resource shortages due to the concentration of personnel and animals in one area. Conversely, during times of insecurity, traders adopted a cohesive approach to enhance their collective defense. Historical accounts, including Oobat's records from the 1830s, highlighted the substantial flow of people from Gondar to Dabarek weekly, engaging in the exchange of cattle and cloth for salt. This trade facilitated Dabarek's ability to pay a significant annual tax to the governor of Semén.

The market at Dabarek, according to various sources, was a vibrant gathering held on different days of the week, attracting merchants from diverse regions. Rüppell noted the presence of numerous peasants who journeyed up to 12 hours to attend the market, which, at times, accommodated as many as 10,000 individuals. Prices were notably competitive, with a hundred chickens attainable for a dollar.

At Adwa, Gondar merchants intersected with critical trade caravans arriving from the coast and the Dankali area, as well as from various parts of Tigray, Amhara, and Scioa. Caravans bound for the Red Sea consistently expanded along their route as smaller groups transported typical interior products such as wax, coffee, ivory, gold, buffalo horns, hides, ghee, honey, and mules. This vibrant trade network underscored the historical significance of the Gondar-Adwa-Massawa Route in fostering economic interactions and cultural exchange throughout the region. Upon concluding their business endeavours in

Massawa, Christian merchants typically embarked on a return journey to their places of origin. In contrast, Muslim traders, who skilfully combined commerce with religious devotion, frequently extended their travels to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca. From this spiritual journey, they would bring back a diverse array of merchandise intended for sale within their home countries. The common ports frequented by these pilgrim-merchants included Jeddah, Loheia, Hodeida, and Mecca.

In the 1830s, Combes and Tamisier provided a vivid description of this trade route, underscoring the rich and varied commodities transported by caravans arriving at the coastal regions. These caravans were laden not only with thousands of slaves but also substantial quantities of valuable resources, including gold, civet, ivory, ox horns, hides, coffee of a quality superior to that of Yemen, rhinoceros horns, gum, senna, wax, and ghee.

Upon their return journey from Massawa, these caravans embarked on an inland expedition, bearing a plethora of goods. These items encompassed carpets, various types of cloths, velvets, silks, red and blue fabrics, cotton cambric, and printed calico used to line sheepskins. Additionally, the caravans transported shields, long and heavy swords, Turkish horse pistols, flint or wick guns, glass trinkets, cut glass, spices like pepper, cinnamon, and cloves, aromatic essences, sugar, rice, cotton thread (often in red), old copper for the crafting of earrings and bracelets, tobacco leaves, as well as luxury articles such as silk umbrellas, small mirrors, razors, large scissors, sewing needles, and Red Sea shells. These shells were skilfully transformed by the women of Tigray into necklaces and embellishments for their leather coats, reflecting the diverse and intricate trade network that characterized this historical route.

Gojjam is located in the northwestern part of Ethiopia and had a history of involvement in the domestic slave trade. Slavery persisted in this region, and it became a prominent market for those seeking to buy or sell enslaved individuals. Scioa also known as Scioa is another significant center for the slave trade situated in central Ethiopia.

Gondar and Adwa, in the norther part of Ethiopia, are two ancient imperial capitals of Ethiopia in the historical province of Bagemdir , which is currently part of the Amhara region. The old province of Bagemdir is often referred to as “the province of Gondar”. Prominent centers, they both hosted two significant fairs per week, in addition to smaller markets for minor goods on other days.<sup>160</sup>

The diffusion of Islam into the towns of Bagemdir was primarily attributed to Muslim traders and religious scholars who arrived from Massawa along established trade routes. However, pinpointing the exact period of this propagation remains challenging. It is evident, though, that from its inception, the dissemination of Islam into Bagemdir was closely associated with trade, craftsmanship, and the presence of vibrant market centers. To a certain extent, the Islamization of the towns in Bagemdir also reflected the assimilation of local customs and practices, as long as they did not directly contradict the teachings of Islam. Muslim merchants facilitated the trade between the Christian highlands of Bagemdir and two key destinations: Mätämma - Gallabat on the Ethio-Sudanese border and the port of Massawa on the Red Sea. Within the Amharic-speaking Muslim community of Bagemdir, similar to the Tigrinna-speaking Muslims of Tigray and the Eritrean highlands, they were referred to as “Jabarti”<sup>161</sup>. In Bagemdir, a region historically dominated by Christianity, there existed a minority Muslim presence in various villages during the first three and a half decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, pockets of Muslims were discernible in crucial market towns of Bagemdir, with the majority of them engaged in trade, while some practiced weaving as artisans. Notably, Islam played a significant role in facilitating the flow of capital and commodities between Italian Eritrea and the burgeoning economy of Bagemdir<sup>162</sup>.

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<sup>160</sup> Ahmad, A. H. (1996). Trade and Islam in the Towns of Bagemdir 1900-1935. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 29(2), 5–21.

<sup>161</sup> Trimmingham, J. S. (1965). *Islam in Ethiopia*. London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 150.

<sup>162</sup> Ahmad, A. H., cit., 5-6.



Figure 2.3 - Map adapted from «Carlo Rossetti's map showing the trade routes between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan, 1912

For the first three and a half decades of the twentieth century, crafts and long-distance trade were the main occupations of Muslims of Bagemdir. Muslim merchants, mainly those of [...] Gondar, dominated the trade of the wider northwestern Ethiopia and the Red Sea region. Muslims from Arabia and the Sudan preferred to deal with their co-religionists at the main points of articulation between Gondar and the wider region - Massawa and Mätamma - Gallabat. The Muslims [...] involved in undertaking long-distance trade and thereby came to preponderate in commercial towns. Some Christian merchants of Bagemdir obviously were involved in commerce as well. Nonetheless,

Christians had many other opportunities which were basically closed to Muslims: farming, the army, the court and the legal system etc. In the main, there was a general Christian prejudice against commerce. Nevertheless, this did not stop some Christians from taking part in commerce when they wanted to. Yet, it is also true that Muslims, excluded as they were from the magistral posts in the political life of Christian Ethiopia, enjoyed success in commerce when dealing with their co-religionists at Mätämma and Massawa.<sup>163</sup>

During the 1900s, trade between Gondar and Asmara involved both Muslim and Christian merchants from Gondar. Merchants from Gondar and other towns in Bagemdir found ready markets for their goods. Furthermore, Italian colonial administration presented rifles as gifts to every merchant traveling to Eritrea. In Asmara, merchants arriving from Bagemdir and other parts of northern Ethiopia were exempt from customs duties, further incentivizing trade. To attract trade from Bagemdir to Eritrea, Italian engineers improved the road connecting Bagemdir and Eritrea. Two primary trade routes from Gondar to Massawa existed, facilitating commerce between these regions<sup>164</sup>.

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<sup>163</sup> Ahmad, A. H., cit., 7.

<sup>164</sup> During Ferdinando Martini's tenure as governor of Italian Eritrea (1897 - 1907), efforts were made to strengthen Eritrea's position in Red Sea commerce. In 1903, Martini instructed Major Ciccodicola, the Italian Minister at Addis Ababa, to secure Emperor Menelik's permission for the construction of a camel caravan road from the Ethio-Eritrean border to Nuqara. Menelik granted Martini the concession to build the road and informed the leaders of Bagemdir of his decision. Shortly thereafter, Major Ciccodicola was directed by Martini to request permission to extend the mule caravan road from Nuqara to Gondar. Menelik once again granted the concession to Martini, with the stipulation that ultimately the road would become the property of the Ethiopian government. This agreement established direct communication between Eritrea and Bagemdir, providing an advantageous route for importing and exporting goods for Italy's colony.

The principal occupations accessible to the Muslim population in Gondar revolved around trade and weaving. Notably, trade, both at the local and international levels, emerged as the predominant pursuit among Muslims. Muslim merchants from Gondar held sway over trade activities in the broader Red Sea region and had honed their expertise in long-distance commerce, ultimately establishing dominance in Gondar's commercial landscape. Additionally, a significant portion of Gondar's Muslim community also engaged in weaving, likely as an extension of their involvement in the cotton trade originating from Gallabat <sup>165</sup>. In contrast, Gondar's Christian merchants also possessed trade expertise, yet they had access to a wider array of opportunities that were largely closed off to Muslims. These opportunities spanned farming, military careers, court positions, and legal appointments. Generally, Christians harboured a certain bias against engaging in commerce, although this did not deter some Christians from participating in trade when they chose to do so. However, it is worth noting that despite their exclusion from prominent political roles in Christian Ethiopia, Muslims found success in commerce, especially when conducting business with fellow Muslims at Mätämma and Massawa.

Muslims held a key role in Gondar's economy, overseeing the importation of foreign goods from coastal regions and the export of valuable commodities such as gold, ivory, civet, and slaves. Their influence contributed significantly to Gondar's status as a center for wholesale trade in much of northwestern Ethiopia.

The city-state of Harar, in eastern Ethiopia, was historically known for its engagement in the slave trade. It was a major hub connecting Ethiopia to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade routes, where enslaved individuals were often sold to foreign markets. Hirmata, in the Kingdom of Gimma, located in southwestern Ethiopia, was one of the most important market where the sale of enslaved individuals took place.. However, Hirmata and Harar emerge as two distinct "slave market" case studies: while Gimma is renowned for hosting one of the largest markets in all of Africa, Harar represents a unique exception not

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<sup>165</sup> Ahmad, A. H., cit., 162-163.

only in terms of the coexistence of different religious faiths and commercial activities but also as a city with a Muslim majority.

Hirmata, located in southwestern Ethiopia, held a prominent position as one of the most significant markets for the trade of enslaved individuals. The possession, acquisition, and trading of enslaved individuals were well-established practices dating back to ancient times in the Gimma Kingdom. During the reign of Abba Jiffar II, Gimma became one of Ethiopia's major hubs for the slave trade. This status was largely attributed to its strategic geographic location, serving as a crossroads for caravans arriving from both the northern and southwestern regions of the country. Abba Jiffar II even incentivized the slave trade by reducing the taxes on it, attracting numerous caravans to Gimma to sell or exchange various goods, including slaves and ivory. Gimma annually exported more than 4,000 slaves, and this trade persisted until the 1920s. As the trade neared its end, Gimma continued to export thousands of additional slaves<sup>166</sup>.

Some sources have indicated that Abba Jiffar II, the ruler of Gimma, was one of the foremost participants in the slave trade, overseeing transactions involving over ten thousand slaves. Vanderheyem observed in 1894 that slaves were being sold, even at night, in Abba Jiffar's quarter in Addis Ababa, dubbing him the "ruler of the kingdom of slave trade" Woldemariam reported in 1984. A decade later, another observer described the king as "the biggest slave trader in the world"<sup>167</sup>. The Kingdom of Gimma had primary markets where slaves were openly traded alongside other commodities. The largest of these markets was Hirmata, located near the palace and held every Thursday. It was always bustling and attracted numerous merchants, including foreigners. As Tekalign notes in 1883, Gimma was visited by the French explorer Jules Borelli. According to the explorer Jules Borelli, "more than 15,000-20,000 people used to attend the Hirmata market in Gimma"<sup>168</sup>. Borelli reported that Abba Jiffar II

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<sup>166</sup> Pankhurst, R. (1968). An introduction to the economic history of Ethiopia, from early times to 1800. London: Lalibela House, *et passim*.

<sup>167</sup> Seid, A. M. (2015). A social institution of slavery and slave trade in Ethiopia: Revisited. *African Journal of History and Culture*, 7, 3, 85-90.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibidem*.



avored the continuation of the slave trade in his kingdom because it was the primary source of Gimma's autonomy after its conquest in 1882. From its southern borders, Gimma received a substantial amount of ivory and slaves sold within the kingdom. This ivory, in turn, served as an annual tribute to Menelik. It is reported that Abba Jiffar II paid a significant amount of tribute to Menelik, including 60 horses, 60 mules, 100 pots of honey, 30 elephant tusks, 60 slaves, 100 sacks of coffee, 20 lion and tiger skins, 30 civet cat glands, and a certain quantity of thalers. In 1886, Borelli claimed that the king offered "about five women and six eunuchs in exchange for a Winchester rifle". At that time, Abba Jiffar II exchanged "two slaves for two dogs and paid five slaves to his dentist"<sup>169</sup>.

Harar, according to historical accounts, is believed to have provided refuge to the initial fifteen Muslims sent by Prophet Muhammad during the first *hijra*<sup>170</sup>. These individuals had fled persecution in Mecca in 615 AD and found sanctuary in the Kingdom of Aksum, ruled by *Negus* Ella Saham, who graciously allowed them to practice Islam without hindrance<sup>171</sup>.

In recognition of this hospitality, Muhammad declared that Abyssinia, likely derived from the Arabic term "Al-Abasia" denoting Aksum, should forever remain immune from *jihad*<sup>172</sup>. The community of believers who settled in Harar is said to have embraced Islam eight years earlier than their counterparts in Medina, establishing the notion that Islam in Ethiopia is as ancient as Islam itself<sup>173</sup>. Harar, a small enclave, emerged as a bastion where devout missionaries propagated Islam among black Africans. Its significance lay not only in the propagation of Islam but also in its close relationship with the Ethiopian

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<sup>169</sup> Seid, A. M., cit., 86-87.

<sup>170</sup> See *glossary*.

<sup>171</sup> Ahmed, H. (1996). Aksum In Muslim Historical Traditions. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 29(2), 47-66; Mansour, F. (2009). The immigration to Abyssinia: a new interpretation. *University Journal* 13, 57-69.

<sup>172</sup> Abbink, J. (1999). Ethiopian Islam and the Challenge for Diversity. *ISIM Newsletter* 4, 24.

<sup>173</sup> Negash, T. (2008). Distressed, yet Confident, Ethiopia Enters the Third Millennium. *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 1.

Christian state<sup>174</sup>. Over the centuries, Harar evolved into a thriving marketplace, serving as a base for traders whose caravan routes extended from the Middle East deep into the interior of Africa. Beginning in the 13th century, these international trade routes facilitated the exchange of not only goods but also slaves. This was attributed to both foreign commercial activities and the active participation of southern Ethiopia in interregional and international slave trade networks, which linked Ethiopia with the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Ottoman world<sup>175</sup>. In the 19th century, Harar was notorious as the epicentre of the slave trade in Eastern Africa<sup>176</sup>.

These markets, despite the changing political landscape and efforts to abolish slavery, continued to facilitate the sale of enslaved individuals well into the twentieth century. The internal demand for enslaved labor, often driven by border conflicts and inter-clan disputes, contributed to the persistence of this troubling practice. Additionally, external pressures and international anti-slavery campaigns gradually played a role in efforts to eradicate slavery and the slave trade in Ethiopia. In his 1988 article titled *Slavery and the Slave Trade in Southern Ethiopia in the 19th Century*, T. Fernyhough of the University of Florida, addressed the subject of slave routes and markets within the context of southern Ethiopia:

Since antiquity Ethiopian rulers derived wealth from slavery and the slave trade, increasing reliance on these revenues from the thirteen century as they expanded the Abyssinian state and the trade nexus. Like

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<sup>174</sup> Trimmingham, J. S. (1969). *Islam in Africa*. New York: James Kritzeck and William H. Lewis eds.

<sup>175</sup> Nicolini, B. (2011). I confine delle città africane. *Quaderni Asiatici* 93, 59; Bonacci, Gi. and Meckelburg, A. (2017) Revisiting Slavery and the Slave Trade in Ethiopia. *Northeast African Studies* 2, 5-30.

<sup>176</sup> Burton, R. F., cit., 137.

their predecessors, Gondarine rulers after 1630 also raided, traded and taxed slaves.<sup>177</sup>

The institution of slave trade and slavery has been deeply ingrained in Ethiopian society since as early as the thirteenth century. It is imperative to meticulously differentiate between these two interconnected yet distinct phenomena<sup>178</sup>, within the Ethiopian historical context.

The former pertains to the intricate web of foreign commercialization, implicating southern Ethiopia in the sprawling networks of inter-regional and international slave trade. This participation interconnected Ethiopia with regions such as the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and the Ottoman world, making it an integral node in the global trade of enslaved individuals.

Slavery, characterized as “endemic” to Ethiopian society, transcends the fluidity of changing borders throughout its historical evolution. This distinction is of paramount importance as it underscores the multifaceted nature of slavery and the domestic trade of enslaved individuals in East Africa, which has often been underrepresented in historical discourse and remains insufficiently commemorated to this day. In 1964, Pankhurst asserted that slavery in Ethiopia possessed a history of “great antiquity”. This statement finds substantiation in historical inscriptions dating back to as early as 1495 B.C., which chronicle the presence of slavery within the Land of Punt. This historical evidence unequivocally indicates that the institution of slavery was deeply ingrained in the region’s history.

It is essential to recognize that the practice of slave trade did not originate with European colonization in Africa; rather, it was a pre-existing institution

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<sup>177</sup> Fernyhough, T. (December 01, 1988). Slavery and the Slave Trade in Southern Ethiopia in the 19th Century. *Slavery & Abolition*, 9, 3, 103-130.

<sup>178</sup> Giulia Bonacci, & Alexander Meckelburg. (2017). Revisiting Slavery and the Slave Trade in Ethiopia. *Northeast African Studies*, 17(2), 5-30.

with porous boundaries and adaptability that saw shifts in trading routes and increased demand for enslaved individuals from the interior regions to the coastal areas of West Africa, ultimately fuelling the transatlantic slave trade to the Americas.

Furthermore, historical sources provide accounts of a flourishing slave trade during the reign of the Axumite kingdom, which dominated the area between 100 and 940 A.D. This kingdom encompassed parts of present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia, and slavery constituted a significant facet of their economy and society.

It is imperative to underscore that slavery endured as a “national custom” in Ethiopia for a protracted period, as reported by Comyn-Platt. This implies that the practice of slavery was deeply embedded in Ethiopian culture and society. Remarkably, even rulers such as Emperor Menelik II (1844-1913) and Emperor Haile Selassie, notwithstanding their positions of power, were purported to possess thousands of slaves. This fact underscores the prevalence and acceptance of this institution.

It is worth noting that some rulers, including Emperor Menelik II (1844-1913) and Emperor Haile Selassie, although not necessarily openly endorsing the institution, still owned thousands of slaves due to the entrenched societal norms. Additionally, certain historical figures, like Yasu, were directly involved in slave raiding expeditions, with the most notable instance being the 1912 slave raiding expedition.

The cost of a male slave could quadruple between southern Ethiopia and coastal areas, with the potential for a tenfold increase. Female slaves, on the other hand, commanded even higher prices, ranging from ten to fifteen times more expensive on the Red Sea coast compared to their source regions. Teenage girls, known as *wasef*, were particularly valuable commodities. In regions like the Omotic and Gibe states, slave prices were often calculated in terms of amole (salt bars) and Maria Theresa dollars, varying between 20 and 30 amole or equivalent values. The price disparities extended across different regions, such as the Abay (Blue Nile) area, where slave prices fluctuated, reaching as high as

16 thalers for an attractive girl. The influence of geographical factors was evident on the eastern route through Scioa to Tajurah in 1840, where the cost of a male slave escalated from three thalers in Kaffa or Walamo to five in Rogge and a staggering 40 on the Bay of Tajurah. As slaves traversed from African to Arabian coasts, their value typically doubled, with the most substantial price surges occurring in the Persian Gulf, where Ethiopian slaves were highly sought after by discerning buyers. Furthermore, the demand for slaves extended beyond the coastal regions, finding appreciation even in the Ethiopian highlands, among Nilotic groups, and within the Omo Valley areas.

In 2000, H. Fisher provided insights into the pricing dynamics, offering a comparative view of slave prices that paints a more intricate picture. Fisher's examination extended to the Cairo market <sup>179</sup> during the nineteenth century, where he observed distinct patterns. Typically, the price of black girls, while generally higher than that of boys, exhibited some variability. Prices for black adults surpassed those of boys by a substantial margin, ranging from 50 to 100 percent higher. Remarkably, eunuchs commanded the highest prices, often reaching double or even triple the value of black male adults. Abyssinian boys, originating from Ethiopia, held a slightly higher price tag than their black counterparts, with the disparity growing to 100 percent in the older age brackets. Abyssinian girls, however, stood out as significantly more expensive, with price differentials ranging from 25 to a staggering 600 percent higher than their black counterparts. This nuanced perspective on slave pricing underscores the intricacies of the trade, revealing a complex web of factors influencing the valuation of enslaved individuals.

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<sup>179</sup> Fisher, H. J. (2000). *Slavery in the History of Muslim Black Africa*. New York: New York University Press, 330.

## 2.2 Role of Religion in the Slave Trade: The *Kebrä Negast* code <sup>180</sup>

As Pankhurst noted in his article *Ethiopian Monetary and Banking Innovations in the Nineteenth Century* and Henry Salt in his *[A] voyage to Abyssinia* <sup>181</sup>, the trade routes in Ethiopia were primarily controlled by Muslim merchants.

the Abyssinians are little acquainted with commercial transactions, as they dedicate their lives solely to war and agriculture. All trade has rested from a very early period in the hands of the Mahometans.<sup>182</sup>

British Consul, Walter Plowden, conducted observations that shed light on the economic landscape of northern Ethiopian provinces. During the end of the XIX century, it became evident that the Ethiopian Muslim population had firmly established a pronounced presence within the realm of commercial endeavours. Remarkably, they seldom ventured into alternative forms of employment. In fact, a substantial portion, approximately three-quarters, of Ethiopia's trade activities fell under their purview <sup>183</sup>.

This economic dominance extended not only to regions where the Muslim population was in the majority but also encompassed areas primarily inhabited by Christians, such as in the case of Bagemdir:

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<sup>180</sup> See glossary.

<sup>181</sup> Salt, H. (1814). *A Voyage to Abyssinia*. London: F.C. and J. Rivington, *passim*.

<sup>182</sup> Pankhurst, R. (1963). Ethiopian Monetary and Banking Innovations in the Nineteenth Centuries, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*.

<sup>183</sup> Trimmingham, J. S. (1969). *Islam in Africa*. New York: James Kritzeck and William H. Lewis eds., 58-61.

Local Muslims, the few Arabs as well as Christian merchants of Gondar dominated the trade of the Lake Tana region with Eritrea and the Sudan as they assembled a considerable amount of capital.<sup>184</sup>

Muslim traders were frequently entrusted with the management of customs duties, exemplifying their influence. For instance, Rüppell's estimations indicated that the Muslim district in Gondar was comprised of roughly three hundred houses during his time, accounting for a massive portion of the city's total housing.

Muslims, rich as well as poor, constituted a distinctly submerged community. My informants recounted that the rich built houses to serve as mosques. Mosques were simple huts like the ordinary houses of the various villages and towns. However, mosques were kept in better repair.<sup>36</sup> Mosques were built in the centers of Muslim quarters in towns and caravan stops. The Christian elite of Bagemdir like everywhere else in the Christian highlands forbade the Muslims in towns from constructing well-built mosques with minarets.<sup>185</sup>

Furthermore, Salt's observations from approximately a decade later highlighted that Muslims in Adwa virtually held a monopoly over trade in northern Ethiopia, consequently maintaining a heightened degree of significance compared to other regions within the empire.

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<sup>184</sup> Ahmad, A. H., cit., 9.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibi*, 10.

The Ethiopian Muslims, many of whom embarked on pilgrimages to Mecca, frequently exhibited a command of the Arabic language and engaged in extensive travel both within Ethiopia and across the Middle East. Historical evidence from the mid-19th century even attests to individuals like Yusuf, who had ventured as far as Paris and London, demonstrating proficiency in both English and French. Meanwhile, Arab traders, renowned for their extensive travels, traversed every corner of Ethiopia, contributing significantly to its commerce<sup>186</sup>. Despite their invaluable contributions to trade, the Arab merchants were often viewed with suspicion. During periods when Ethiopia was at odds with the Turks, it was widely believed that a considerable number of Muslim merchants served as spies, casting a shadow over their activities.

Conversely, although Christians in Ethiopia generally held reservations about commerce, a handful of Christian traders emerged over time. In the early 19th century, Gobat referred to a prosperous Christian merchant named Kidana-Maryam in Adwa. A generation later, a French scientific mission identified the wealthiest merchant in Adwa as Hagos Darás, also a Christian. Subsequently, Rassam mentioned a couple of Christian traders in Gondar, Tasfa Haylu, described as “the chief merchant” of the city, and Waldà-Sellasé Gobazé, both of whom ventured to Massawa. Additionally, there were two merchants in Qorata, Kasa and Wàndé. D’Abbadie confirmed Kasa’s role as the primary Christian merchant in Qorata, where wealthy monks, according to Gobat, were believed to lend money at an exorbitant rate of 240 percent. Heuglin noted the presence of Christian traders in various Ethiopian locations such as Gondar, Derita, Yefag, and Qorata, albeit their numbers remained modest. However, Plowden, who also mentioned Kidana-Maryam previously, reported that by the mid-19th century, there were scarcely twenty such Christian merchants throughout the empire.

The latter half of the 19th century witnessed a further decline in the number of Christian traders due to conflicts with the Egyptians and Dervishes.

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<sup>186</sup> Società Geografica Italiana. (1882). La Spedizione Italiana in Africa. *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, 398-402.



In the early 1880s, Tasfa Haylu of Gondar met his demise while traveling to Massawa, falling victim to an Egyptian-backed bandit named Debub Araya. A few years later, in 1887, Dervishes conducted a massacre targeting most of the Christian traders in Gondar. Powell-Cotton, writing at the turn of the century, lamented that nearly all of them not only lost their wealth but also their lives, leaving only one prominent merchant in the area.

The regulation of the slave trade in Ethiopia was profoundly shaped by the principles outlined in the *Kebra Negast* manuscript<sup>187</sup>, often described as the repository of Ethiopian national and religious sentiment, as expounded by Ullendorff<sup>188</sup>. The *Kebra Nagast*, also known as the *Kebra Negast*, *Fetha Nagast* or *Fiteha Negest*, is an ancient traditional Ethiopian legal code with its origins tracing back to the 4th to 6th century AD and subsequently recompiled in the 14th century. This manuscript serves as a religious, historical, and archaeological text, and it played a vital role in legitimizing the practice of slavery, at least until its complete abolition in 1930 during the regency of Haile Selassie I (1892-1975).

The primary source of the *Kebra Negast* is the Old Testament, with additional contributions from rabbinic texts, Coptic, Egyptian, and Ethiopian legends. The term *Kebra Negast* itself is derived from the Ge'ez language and translates to "The Glory of the Kings". Ge'ez is a nearly extinct Semitic language that was spoken within the borders of the Ethiopian Empire until the 14th century. It served as a precursor to modern Amharic and Tigrinya, analogous to how Latin functioned in Europe.

The *Kebra Negast*, as a legal and religious document, held a major influence on Ethiopian society, particularly in matters concerning slavery. Its sanctioning of slavery was a reflection of its historical and cultural context, and this practice endured until its formal abolition in 1930. This historical connection between the *Kebra Negast* and the regulation of the slave trade underscores the intricate interplay between religious and legal texts and their impact on societal norms and practices in Ethiopia.

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<sup>187</sup> See glossary.

<sup>188</sup> Ullendorff, E. (1968). *Ethiopia and the Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This manuscript narrates the captivating love story <sup>189</sup> between King Solomon and Macheda, the Queen of Sheba<sup>190</sup>. Beyond being a cornerstone of African Christian literature, the *Kebra Negast* holds immense significance for understanding Rastafarianism. Rastafarians passionately believe that Ethiopia is the new Israel, with the Negus embodying the return of Christ on Earth. They anticipate that the Negus will fulfil prophetic duties before the world's ultimate conclusion. To Rastafarians, the Ark of the Covenant, brought to Ethiopia from the Temple of Zion, symbolizes hope for all future generations and a cause worth striving for.

The *Kebra Negast* comprises two principal sections: one governing ecclesiastical laws and the other dealing with secular law, where elements of Sharia law are also present. This body of legal principles was intended for Christians by the dominant Muslim society <sup>191</sup>. Notably, the *Kebra Negast*

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<sup>189</sup> The *Kebra Negast*, specifically in its section concerning Machedà, recounts a story of significant importance within Ethiopian mythology. According to this valuable account, the Ethiopian imperial family can trace its lineage directly to the romantic encounter between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, known as Machedà in African tradition.

The book narrates how Solomon met the Queen and had a child with her, who was crowned as King with the title Menelik I, becoming the first Emperor of Ethiopia. The testimony within the *Kebra Nagast* also reports how Menelik allegedly clandestinely transported the Ark of the Covenant, a tangible symbol of divine presence in the world, from Jerusalem in Judea to Ethiopia. According to the tales and legends, it is believed to remain in Ethiopia to this day.

<sup>190</sup> The potential relationship between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Machedà, may have been rooted in the interconnection that existed at the time between communities in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Historical evidence suggests that ancient Ethiopian communities were comprised of a Semitic population that migrated across the Red Sea from southern Arabia and intermingled with the local non-Semitic inhabitants. Furthermore, the ancient Ethiopian kingdom of Axum also ruled over a portion of southern Arabia, including present-day Yemen, at least until the advent of Islam in the 7th century. Additionally, both Amharic and Tigrinya, the two primary languages of Ethiopia, belong to the Semitic language family. Supporting this notion of a relationship between Arabia and Ethiopia, numerous archaeological findings and inscriptions in the ancient script of the southern Arabian peninsula serve as further evidence.

<sup>191</sup> Jembere, A. (2000). *An introduction to the legal history of Ethiopia: 1434-1974*. Münster: Lit Verslag, 36.

regulated the purchase, ownership, and manumission of slaves and expressly prohibited the sale of Christians to non-believers. Christians themselves were permitted to buy slaves but were forbidden from participating in the sale of slaves. This restriction was applicable solely to Christians, while Muslims were free to engage in the sale of slaves. According to the Mosaic law, unbelievers and their offspring could be enslaved, and Islamic tradition dictated that the initial enslavement should occur during war or raids. Consequently, there was a rise in slave raids and conflicts in the southernmost regions of Ethiopia<sup>192</sup>. Awareness of the prohibition against enslaving believers led to many cases of conversion as a strategy to avoid capture<sup>193</sup>.

This differential treatment allowed Muslims to establish a bona fide monopoly, thereby strengthening their exports of slaves to regions such as Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, and even India. This dynamic is rooted in the stipulations of the *Kebra Negast*, which granted exclusive selling rights to Muslim traders while affording Christians the ability to purchase slaves.

The institution of slavery was permitted in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa until the first half of the twentieth century and was officially and legally endorsed by the *Kebra Negast*. Its words held widespread recognition as “law” by numerous Ethiopian rulers, including Emperor Menelik (1889-1913).

As per the *Kebra Negast*, one category of individuals who could be legally enslaved were prisoners of war; war and horses bring some under the service of others, for the law of war and victory makes the vanquished slaves of the victors.

The practice of slave trading in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa is described in detail in historical accounts. There were designated areas for selling slaves in open markets, with reports indicating that over 10-15 stone blocks were used to display slaves for sale. It is said that many thousands of slaves were sold in these markets. During market days, slaves were well-fed and had butter

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<sup>192</sup> Hallaq, Wael B. (2009). *Shari'a: theory, practice and modern transformations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 307.

<sup>193</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 113.

applied to their bodies. This was done to make them appear intelligent, strong, and attractive enough to command a high price<sup>194</sup>.

Buyers of slaves employed various mechanisms to ensure the slaves' capabilities. Buyers would stretch the arms and legs of the slaves forward and backward to check for broken limbs. They would also examine the eyes and teeth of the slaves to assess their vision and ability to eat well with their teeth. To test the hearing and speaking abilities of the slaves, buyers would engage them in conversation, treating them as if they were assessing a talking parrot. Additionally, in consultation with the merchants, buyers would slap the faces of the slaves to evaluate their strength and emotional responses (Pankhurst, 1968a).

Physical attributes played a role in determining the price of slaves. Short and sturdy Black male slaves commanded higher prices, while for female slaves, the opposite was true. Tall, slim female slaves, called *ferso*, who could easily reach the bottom of a jar for preparing the local beverage, were considered more valuable. Age and gender also factored into the price of a slave in Gimma. Young male slaves or *gurbe* aged 10-15 years were more expensive than older ones, called *illijs* over the age of 20. Gurbe slaves were favored because they could be well-trained as personal servants and provided longer service. Similarly, female slaves over 8-15 years of age, referred to as Tombore, had higher prices compared to Gardana slaves. Tombore slaves were even considered as potential concubines for their owners and wives for male slaves.

The acquisition of slaves in Ethiopia involved various means, including barter, exchange of goods like rock salt bars, weaponry, or currency like Maria Theresa thalers. Abyssinian boys were slightly more expensive than their Black counterparts, while Abyssinian girls commanded prices ranging from 25 to 600 percent higher than those for Black girls. As slaves were transported from southern Ethiopia to coastal trading hubs like Massawa, the price of male slaves would increase significantly, sometimes quadrupling or even increasing tenfold.

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<sup>194</sup> Pankhurst, R. (1968). *An introduction to the economic history of Ethiopia, from early times to 1800*. London: Lalibela House.

Female slaves, in particular, cost ten to fifteen times more on the Red Sea coast compared to their place of origin <sup>195</sup>.

The acquisition of slaves in Gimma followed four general methods: capture in warfare or raids: Major slave raids occurred in areas like Yam Kaffa, Dawro, Konta, and Sidamo, where slaves were abducted and sold in Gimma's slave markets; abductions: More than three thousand slaves were reported to have been kidnapped in a year in these areas or on the way to their villages or from their homes at night <sup>196</sup>. Kidnappers would then hand over the slaves to traveling caravans; criminal sentencing to slavery: Most of the slaves in Gimma were not native to the kingdom. Many were enslaved due to royal judicial pronouncements, as slavery was preferred over the death penalty in Gimma. The lack of labor in the construction of Gimma's fortification trench, known as the *berro* also led to allegations of criminality, including the family; and finally the direct purchase: Buyers would directly visit the slave market to make their purchases.

According to the *Fetha Nagast*, slavery was legitimized in numerous cases, allowing the master to exercise control through the following modes of subjugation: slavery by faith: this entailed the enslavement of non-believers or atheists and the children of slaves; slavery by affection: A woman cohabiting or marrying a slave could be reduced to slavery; temporary slavery for debts: Also known as servitude for debts; punitive slavery: Slavery could be imposed as a punishment for committing certain crimes. Emperor Menelik's 1899 decree, imposing slavery on thieves and individuals who sold slaves in violation of his prohibition, is an example of this form of slavery.

According to the *Kebra Negast*, slaves had a dual status. On one hand, they were treated as mere property. Slaves could not own property of their own, serve as witnesses (although this prohibition was often disregarded in practice, especially in cases of homicide), make wills (although they were allowed to do so

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<sup>195</sup> Clarence-Smith, W. G. (1989). *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century*. Routledge, 113.

<sup>196</sup> Pankhurst, R. cit., *passim*.

with their owner's permission), act as judges, hold other public offices, serve as guardians, or represent their owners in legal matters. Most importantly, they could be sold (with a notable exception being the sale of a "believing slave to an unbeliever") or rented, just like any other movable asset. Similarly, slaves could not hold public offices such as that of a judge or guardian. They were not allowed to provide testimony in courts. However, the owner of slaves became legally responsible for any actions or crimes, including murder, committed by their slaves. The owner could become free either by emancipation or by handing over the slave to the injured party. Likewise, the punishment of a slave became an official phenomenon in the country, including flogging, whipping, and even death. The law strictly prohibited the theft or escape of a slave. According to the law, one was required to return the slave to their owners along with an equal price. On the other hand, a person might have the right to claim a reward if they had returned a runaway slave to their owners. The recaptured slave would have to face severe punishments, including flogging, beatings, executions, and eventually being resold to others with no say in the matter.

Within Ethiopian society, slaves occupied a significant role as domestic servants. They seamlessly integrated into the households they served, receiving sustenance, clothing, and protection in exchange for their labor. Slaves were not just labourers; they became an integral part of the families that provided for them. This bond allowed them to maintain their names, preserving their cultural identity and religious beliefs. Some individuals were born into slavery due to their lineage, being the children of enslaved parents. Others were bequeathed as inheritances by their masters to their offspring, while still others found themselves in servitude following conflicts, wars, or raids. Ethiopian slavery, seemingly distinct from other forms of historical slavery, bore the hallmark of moral values imparted by the *Kebra Negast*, rendering it a more humane institution. The value of a slave was closely tied to moral considerations, and the rules governing emancipation were clearly defined. As per the law, a slave owner could use their slave as they wished. A slave had no right to refuse to obey their owner's orders. Even a pregnant female slave was obligated to work. It should be noted that the child of a slave belonged to their owner (Pankhurst, 1968b). The law strictly prohibited any form of marriage between free individuals and

slaves. If the wife of an owner committed fornication with a slave, she could be beaten, her hair shaved, her nose broken, and her infamy publicly proclaimed, as per the Fetha Nagast. It prescribed various cases in which slaves must be compulsorily liberated: after serving for a certain number of years, when the slave had served two generations of the same family; upon the owner's decision, if a member of the owner's family became the godparent of the slave or if the slave wanted to pursue the path of becoming a priest or monk; for military service, if the slave wished to become a soldier, as a reward, if the slave had saved the life of their owner; for inherited freedom, if a pregnant slave had been emancipated, her child would be born free; for demonstrated trustworthiness, if a slave had been taken captive during a war but later returned to their owner of their own chance, if a slave owner died without leaving heirs.

On the other hand, there were cases in which slaves, especially Christian slaves, were treated as human beings. These are the exceptions in treatment: the obligation for a slave owner to allow slaves to practice their faith; the prohibition of separating female slaves from their children; prohibition of selling siblings (offered for sale at the same time) to two different buyers: prohibition of separating a slave from their wife or child.

It is reported that due to the wealth of Abba Jiffar, Menelik ordered a large tribute to be paid, consisting of significant quantities of grain for his army to sustain it during the war against the Kaffa kingdom in 1897. Every well-to-do inhabitant of Gimma had at least a couple of slaves in their household. The duties of male slaves included agriculture, loading draft animals, and accompanying their masters on journeys. Female slaves also participated in their masters' domestic and agricultural activities. In fact, the duration of a slave in a particular household was determined by their behaviour and abilities. If a slave were not in good condition, they could be resold or exchanged with others.

Another economic contribution of slaves in the Gimma kingdom was their role in expanding trade. Many merchants came to Gimma from various parts of the country, making this kingdom the main trading center in the southwestern part of the country. On the other hand, slaves also promoted the division of labor, which was necessary for commercial exchanges. Some of them

became blacksmiths, weavers, pottery makers, herders, and beekeepers, providing various products for the market. Loyalty and “special skills” helped a slave to occupy a higher position within the kingdom and Abba Jiffar’s palace.

Some slaves rose to “high” positions in Abba Jiffar II’s palace. Among them the most important and feared was Abba Gaddu Sadacha, a eunuch from Nada; he was a slave and became the head of the prison and chief criminal investigator in Abba Jiffar’s palace. Abba Gorro Gumma, the head of the palace treasury while Abba Jarra Abba Mlare, the governor of Hereto. Abba Bike Shono, the governor and supervisor of coffee production for the Royal House and some became “market chiefs” where they enforced law and order. In general, slaves in Gimma were not treated so harshly. They lived in their owner’s house until their marriage, after which they left their owner’s house and established their own under the “auspices” of their owner. At that point, the owner of the slaves would buy another slave for their domestic activities. Russom concluded that slaves were not treated harshly in Ethiopia. “The Abyssinians” he explained, “are generally very kind to their servants, treating them as members of their family, especially in marriage and death”.



### 2.3 Impact of slavery and post-slavery on Christian-Muslim Relations and the Role of Leaders in Promoting Contemporary Coexistence

Nonetheless, a *modus vivendi* was established between the Christian majority and the Muslim minority. Christians and Muslims accepted their differences in religion and developed mutual trust and good neighbourliness. The Christian local officials, the military and the clergy, cultivated the Muslim merchants to bring them luxurious imported commodities from Massawa and Mätämma. Muslims needed the Christian ruling elite to maintain peace and stability in the market places, trade routes and caravan stops. Muslims also needed the Christian farmers surrounding the towns in which they resided in order to supply them with agricultural produce. Muslims exchanged imported goods and locally produced woven cloth for the agricultural produce of farmers.<sup>197</sup>

The Muslims understood their role within the Christian state, primarily living as merchants and artisans. Their prosperity and survival within the predominantly Christian environment hinged on stable governance and peaceful conditions in the Christian highlands. Christian-dominated Bagemdir, as reported above, exhibited a structured society with distinct class divisions and diverse occupations. Within this framework, Muslims in Bagemdir primarily pursued two economic endeavours: trade as merchants or craftsmanship as weavers. Their specialization in these two fields set them apart. Notably, agriculture was not a common pursuit among Muslims, which often raised

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<sup>197</sup> Ahmad, A. H. (1996). Trade and Islam in the Towns of Bagemdir 1900-1935. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 29(2), 11.

suspensions among the Christian establishment, including the court, army, clergy, and agricultural communities.

However, the majority of Christians in Bagemdir tolerated the presence of the Muslim minority due to the practical contributions of Muslim merchants to the local economy. As a result, a harmonious relationship developed between the Christian elite and the Muslim merchants. This amicable coexistence extended to the voluntary celebration of each other's religious festivals. During Ethiopian New Year, Christmas, and Easter, Muslims presented imported gifts to their Christian friends and the ruling elite. Conversely, Christians reciprocated with offerings of honey, butter, livestock such as sheep and goats, and agricultural produce like grains and cereals during Id al-Fitr, Id al-Adha, and Mawlid. Thus, mutual gift exchanges formed the basis of reciprocity between the Christian and Muslim communities of Bagemdir.

Primarily, Muslims in Bagemdir were distinguished from the Christian populace by their religious beliefs, while otherwise adhering to the general customs and practices of the towns and villages where they resided. It's worth noting that social taboos prevented Christians and Muslims from sharing meals and intermarrying. However, there were documented instances in which affluent Muslim men married Christian women and subsequently converted them to Islam.

[...] After 1855 [...] edicts against slaving, but an illicit trade persisted in their territories and occurred openly at southern markets [...] the Italian defeat at Adwa in 1896 reduced the emperor's dependence on revenues from the slave trade. [...] Ethiopian governments attempted to eliminate the slave trade and bonded labour in society".<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Fernyhough, T. (December 01, 1988). Slavery and the Slave Trade in Southern Ethiopia in the 19th Century. *Slavery & Abolition*, 9, 3, 103-130.

In the latter half of the 19th century, Ethiopia made efforts to abolish the slave trade, yet these endeavours faltered despite European pressures and treaties signed with the British government. Ethiopia's approach to curbing the slave trade never took precedence over other pressing matters on its ruler's agenda <sup>199</sup>.

The divergent attitudes of Ethiopian rulers toward suppressing the slave trade influenced the actual steps taken to achieve this goal. Ethiopian rulers' attempts to regulate or prohibit the slave trade failed due to three primary reasons: the population did not perceive slavery as inherently evil, Ethiopia was surrounded by slave raiders and traders on all sides, and there was no comprehensive effort to eradicate the trade.

The decline of the phenomenon of slavery in Ethiopia can be traced back to a shift in the priorities of various princes who sought greater control over the empire and social consensus. This transition became evident in the mid-19th century when leaders such as Tewodros, followed by Yohannes IV (1837-1889) and Menelik II (1844-1913), issued edicts against slavery. The period during Tewodros (1818-1868) reign, marked by conflicts and the subsequent Dervish invasion, played a significant role in the decline of the city. As we have previously discussed, Gondar, while no longer the capital of an empire, remained a substantial center of trade until the Dervish invasion of 1887. It served as a natural hub where traders converged from various regions, including the Italian Colony of Eritrea, the salt-mines of Assai, the Soudan, and the shores of Lake Tana. Many affluent Nagadis traders called Gondar their home, dispatching caravans in all directions. Unfortunately, most of these traders not only lost their wealth but also their lives at the hands of the Dervishes. Presently, only one prominent merchant remains in the city. The commerce in Gondar during the last decades of the 19th century was nearly non-existent, and only a modest resurgence began in the early 20th century. A British report from 1906 indicated

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<sup>199</sup> Moore-Harell, A. (1999). Economic and Political Aspects of the Slave Trade in Ethiopia and the Sudan in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 32(2/3), 407-421.

that the city's trade connections with Asmara and Qalabat were minimal. However, earlier reports from 1899-1900 estimated significant exports from Gojjam to Metemma and Massawa, as noted by Pankhurst<sup>200</sup>.

Emperor Tewodros (1818-1868)<sup>201</sup> played a fundamental role in the development of the country's first modern roads, achieved without the use of money. Contemporary accounts describe his tireless dedication to manual labor, working from dawn till dusk, personally clearing stones, levelling the terrain, and filling small ravines. His presence ensured that no one would leave or engage in activities like eating or resting until the work was done.

During Emperor Tewodros's reign (1855-1868), the slave trade was already deeply ingrained in Ethiopian society. While Tewodros officially declared the trade illegal, primarily to prevent conversions to Islam and to gain the favor of European governments, he did not take substantial action against slavery itself. He remained tolerant of slave raiding, as long as the victims were not Christians, allowing the trade to persist despite its illegality. Large numbers of slaves were exported from Ethiopia<sup>202</sup>. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, a significant transformation occurred in the historical narrative. Emperor Tewodros II (1818-1868) issued a decree in 1864, mandating his Muslim subjects to either convert to Christianity or depart from his realm. Tewodros further directed his military forces to besiege the city, citing the pretext that its residents were non-compliant with tax obligations. Consequently, the inhabitants of Gondar, encompassing both Christians and Muslims, vacated the city in search of refuge in other locations. Tewodros's military campaign led to the ransacking of Gondar's churches and the looting of its merchants. This destructive episode culminated in the termination of Gondar's political-economic prominence and its erstwhile commercial significance. Gondar had evolved into a hub that attracted a substantial population of Muslims to its

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<sup>200</sup> Pankhurst, R., cit., 49-159.

<sup>201</sup> Bekele, S. (2015). *Monarchical restoration and territorial expansion. The Ethiopian state in the second half of the nineteenth century*, in Prunier, G. & Ficquet, É. (2015). *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*. C. Hurst & Co, 159-168.

<sup>202</sup> Moore-Harell, A., cit., 407-421.

vicinity over two centuries earlier. Emperor Tewodros (1855-1868)'s edict had a profound impact on the Muslim community of Gondar. A majority of Muslims acquiesced to conversion to Christianity under the duress of these circumstances. Conversely, those who resisted conversion dispersed to the outlying regions while steadfastly maintaining their religious faith and cultural traditions<sup>203</sup>.

Emperor Yohannes (1872-1889) expressed his disapproval of slavery, but any attempts to abolish it or even to halt the trade faced opposition from many local chiefs. Slavery persisted, and Yohannes took limited measures to prevent his followers from capturing slaves during raids. Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) strategically employed religion to consolidate state authority. Yohannes was not alone in this approach but rather followed the precedent set by his predecessor, Emperor Tewodros, who considered religious unity a viable means of unifying the Christian highlands. In May-June 1878, Yohannes convened the Council of Borumeda to resolve longstanding doctrinal disputes that had disrupted the Ethiopian Orthodox Church for over a century. Yohannes was particularly stern in his dealings with the Muslims of Wollo, using religion both as a matter of personal belief and as a tool for political unification. He focused his evangelical efforts on the province of Wollo, strategically positioned between Tigray to the north, Bagemdir and Gojjam to the west, and Showa to the south, effectively separating it from the core Christian highlands.

Four months after the Council of Borumeda, in October 1879, Emperor Yohannes communicated to the governor of Aksum in Tigray, that no Muslims would be permitted to remain in the holiest city of the empire. Yohannes declared that any Muslim unwilling to undergo baptism would be required to leave the country. Additionally, he ordered the burning of books related to Islamic exegesis. Conversely, the Emperor promised converts inheritable land, along with the Christian population. Despite the allure of landownership for Muslims, who were largely landless, those in Aksum and Adwa continued to practice Islam.

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<sup>203</sup> Ahmad, A. H. (2000). Muslims of Gondar 1864-1941. *Annales d'Ethiopie*, 16, 167.

In 1881, Emperor Yohannes (1872-1889) visited Gondar and demolished the mosque in the Muslim quarter, replacing it with a church. Similarly, as he had done previously in the holiest city of Aksum, he presented the Muslims of Gondar with a choice: either embrace Christianity or depart from his domain. Those who declined baptism were compelled to seek refuge in Omdurman, Sudan, and Wollo, where they joined the resistance movement led by Shaykh Talha Ibn Ja'far. In the final analysis, Emperor Yohannes's attempts to foster religious unity within the empire yielded limited success<sup>204</sup>. Moreover, in the mid-1870s, Ethiopians made frequent raids for slaves in certain regions, and the trade thrived with the tacit consent of both the Ethiopian government. In 1884, Yohannes committed to abolishing the slave trade through a treaty with the British. He agreed to prohibit and prevent, to the best of his ability, the trade in slaves and their import and export within his dominions. He also pledged to protect liberated slaves and severely punish any attempts to re-enslave them.

Nevertheless, the slave trade in Ethiopia continued clandestinely<sup>205</sup>. The edict for mass conversion of the Muslims in Ethiopia issued by Emperor Yohannes (1872-1889) in the nineteenth century was part of the attempt to unify Ethiopian society against external threats of Egyptian expansion and the Sudanese Mahdist movement, but it resulted in revolt and resistance among many Muslims in Wollo of Ethiopia<sup>206</sup>.

It was only after the passing of Emperor Yohannes that the Ethiopian empire-state of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began to officially embrace a somewhat more benevolent and accommodating approach toward its Muslim constituents. This shift in policy coincided with the incorporation of the southern, southwestern, and eastern regions into the

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<sup>204</sup> Ahmad, A. H., cit., 167-168.

<sup>205</sup> Moore-Harell, A., cit., 407-421.

<sup>206</sup> Abbink, J. (2011). Religion in public spaces: emerging Muslim-Christian polemics in Ethiopia. *African Affairs*, 110(439), 257-258.

empire, where Muslim populations constituted a substantial portion of the overall demographic landscape<sup>207</sup>.

After the demise of Emperor Yohannes during his conflicts with the Mahdist state in March 1889, Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913) adopted a stance of moderation towards the Muslim population. However, it is imperative to note, as articulated convincingly by Richard Caulk, that “the ostensibly moderate attitudes emerging after Menilik ascended to the throne in 1889 do not necessarily signify a complete departure from prior policies”. By the onset of the twentieth century, a former Muslim convert named Shaykh Zakaryas began advocating the primacy of Christianity in Dabra Tabor. His activities gave rise to concerns within the Muslim community in Gondar<sup>208</sup>.

Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913) issued a proclamation that granted Shaykh Zakaryas permission to teach in any Muslim-populated area. Furthermore, Menilik provided him with one hundred rifles, four thousand Maria Theresa Thalers from the imperial treasury, and conferred upon him the fief of Hawarya Abo parish in Bagemdir. Through these actions, Menilik also sought to exploit religious matters for political purposes while encouraging conversions from Islam. It is crucial to understand, however, that Menilik’s primary objective was not so much to promote a widespread conversion of Muslims to Christianity but rather to curtail the expansion of Islam within his empire-state. Within Gondar itself, despite Shaykh Zakaryas’s preaching and the appeal of inheriting land, there was no substantial mass conversion of Muslims to Christianity.

In the later part of the century, Emperor Menelik continued this tradition by actively participating in activities such as tree-cutting at Mount Mengasha and contributing to the construction of churches at Ntoto and elsewhere. Foreign observers, like the British traveller Henry Savage Landor, found Menelik’s practices unique but admirable. Menelik’s actions exemplified his commitment

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<sup>207</sup> Ahmed, H. (2005). The Dynamism of Religious Conversion in the History of Ethiopia: Some Reflections. *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 2(1/2), 195-205.

<sup>208</sup> Ahmad, A. H. (2000). Muslims of Gondar 1864-1941. *Annales d’Ethiopie*, 16, 168-169.

to development and growth in Ethiopia <sup>209</sup>. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that despite these progressive developments, the practice of slavery persisted illicitly within Ethiopian society. Southern Ethiopian markets, including those in Gojjam and Scioa, remained stocked with enslaved individuals who were ready to be sold. Often, the sellers were Oromo and Sidamo sovereigns, engaged in a predominantly Muslim-oriented trade of slaves.

During Menelik II's reign (1884-1913), slavery reached its peak in Ethiopia, especially when the emperor decided to expand into southern territories, engaging in wars and capturing numerous slaves<sup>210</sup>. Menelik's pursuit of alliances with European powers was driven by his desire to strengthen the military apparatus of his empire. This expansion of slavery, along with the reliance on foreign merchants for importing firearms and ammunition, created a complex web of dependencies. Foreign traders, in turn, relied on the goodwill of coastal leaders who imposed heavy taxes and tributes on slaves. Menelik understood the delicate balance in this situation, recognizing that interfering with the slave trade could disrupt the flow of firearms into Ethiopia. As the slave trade became increasingly lucrative, the expansion of the Christian empire and capital-intensive production eventually led to the abolition of slavery. This change also marked the end of the flourishing Kingdom of Gimma, which had been a major source of tribute in terms of slaves and ivory, particularly for Addis Abeba.

During Menelik's reign (1889-1910), despite involving European powers in efforts to abolish the slave trade, it persisted unchanged, with no meaningful steps taken to suppress it. Ethiopia did not witness a genuine struggle to suppress the trade during the 19th century.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Ayele, Y., cit., *passim*.

<sup>210</sup> Pankhurst, R. (1968). *An introduction to the economic history of Ethiopia, from early times to 1800*. London: Lalibela House.

<sup>211</sup> Moore-Harell, A., cit., 407-421.



The imposition of colonialism led to the end of slavery as a mode of production and marked the most complete integration of Africa into the orbit of capitalism. Imperialism employed the rhetoric of anti-slavery, but its most significant features were military expansion and the commercial supremacy of European enterprises.<sup>212</sup>

According to Suzana Miers, there was minimal pressure from Great Britain and France regarding the abolition of slavery, as they held their protectorate over the Gulf of Aden. Nonetheless, the slave trade persisted until 1930, utilizing various means of transporting slaves along the coast, as documented by Pankhurst in 1968 and as detailed by T. Fernyhough and F. Morton. An “illicit” trade continued in these regions, notably in the southern markets of Gojjam and Scioa.

The process of abolishing slavery was slow and initially met with reluctance, particularly during the regency of *Lǐgg* Iasù – also Yasu - (1913-1916), Menelik’s nephew. The prevalence of slave raids led to an increase in the number of enslaved individuals during this period. In the course of this century, Ethiopia witnessed two brief yet significant episodes highlighting the inherent tension between Islam and national identity or integration: the period of Yasu’s interregnum and the Italian occupation<sup>213</sup>.

Under the regency of Tafari (1923), Ethiopia applied for membership in the League of Nations, which compelled Ethiopia to halt the slave trade in accordance with its international agreements, conventions, and declarations. In the absence of viable alternatives, Ethiopia declared the slave trade a capital offense punishable by death. Subsequent to this period, open slave markets were

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<sup>212</sup> Lovejoy, P. E. (2019). *Storia della schiavitù in Africa*. Milano: Bompiani, 418, (*transl.*).

<sup>213</sup> Abbink, J. (1998). An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11, 116.

closed, and slave traders abandoned their conventional routes, opting to travel at night along different paths.

In the last decades of the 19th century, throughout Africa, the social order was centered around slavery as never before. This meant that Africa and Europe found themselves on a collision course where slavery was the central issue, even though Europeans did not always recognize it as such. The imperialist thrust relied on the possibility of establishing a new political and social system in Africa where there was no room for slavery. Although the pressure for change came from external sources, African societies actively participated in the ongoing transformations. The internal politico-economic dynamics in various African regions were closely linked to the process of transforming slavery into a productive system, sometimes connected to the international market and in other cases limited to regional development.<sup>214</sup>

This was also the case in Gimma, where slaves were clandestinely sold at night through intermediaries. One year later, another law on the abolition of slavery was declared by Tafari. It prescribed a penalty of 500 dollars and 10 years of imprisonment and a second offense would result in life imprisonment. This marked the moment when slaves gained the right to be free, and for the first time in the country, Ethiopia liberated a large number of slaves. A positive stance in the treatment of slaves would position Ethiopia favourably with the League of Nations. Therefore, in 1923, Tafari (1892-1975) formally committed to adhere to Article 11, paragraph 1, of the Convention revising the Berlin General Act of 1885 and the Brussels Declaration of 1890, which pertained to the protection

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<sup>214</sup> Lovejoy, P. E., cit., 124-125, 393, (transl).

and supervision of indigenous peoples and, consequently, the gradual abolition of slavery. On September 28, 1923, Tafari issued an edict stating that anyone who bought or sold slaves would be sentenced to death, and on March 31, 1924, he decreed that all slaves would be free seven years after the death of their master, and that all future unborn children would be born as free individuals.

When Tafari became Emperor Haile Selassie I (1892-1975) in 1930, he established an “Office for the Liberation of Slaves” in Gimma, this office was set up in the palace of Abba Jiffar. It was an independent body that reported directly to the emperor. This office oversaw the laws and issued certificates for liberated slaves. The implementation of subsequent anti-slavery laws and the eventual death of Abba Jiffar II threatened Gimma’s autonomous status in the country. This was because his successor, Abba Jobir, was unable to pay the annual tribute to the government. As his wealth and prestige declined, Abba Jobir immediately engaged in “illicit” slave trade, leading to his imprisonment. Although in 1932, the Office for the Suppression of Slavery was established in Addis Ababa, slavery persisted in Ethiopia. In the same year, the British Anti-Slavery Society conducted the well-known Buxton-Polwart investigations, the League of Nations Commission for the Fight Against Slavery collected numerous documents, and in 1935, the Italian Government presented the “Memory about the Situation in Ethiopia” to the League of Nations. However, without genuine economic transformation, no prohibition or decree could eradicate slavery in Ethiopia.

During the reign of Haile Selassie (1930-1974), Muslims were said to be not officially discriminated by the modern Ethiopian state. The Ethiopian Ministry of Information even issued a publication entitled Religious Freedom in Ethiopia (1965), wherein several Muslim representatives underlined that they had not been the subject of any repression. Printed in English, the publication was, however, addressed to a non-Ethiopian audience and related to the conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia in the 1960s.

In regard to the most frequent pilgrimage in the southern region of Ethiopia, it occurred at the end of December in Hararge, situated in the highlands of Qulubi. Emperor Haile Selassie commissioned the construction of

a church dedicated to Saint Gabriel in fulfilment of a vow made by his father, Ras Makonnen, prior to battling the forces of the Harar emir in Calanko in 1887. This pilgrimage, led by the Emperor as an act of filial piety, saw the participation of the royal court, the royal family, and notable figures from various ethnic groups, including the Oromo Qottu and Ittu, who had undergone significant Islamization. Harari, Somali, and Afar, all predominantly Muslim groups, also partook in this Christian pilgrimage dedicated to Gabriel. Annually, on fixed dates, prominent pilgrimages are conducted, either in honor of their respective founders or sacred sites or because Emperor Haile Selassie was associated with them, attracting thousands of participants. In proximity to the capital, festivities like those dedicated to Mary of Sion in Addis Alam and Abbo on the summit of Zeqwala draw large crowds. These gatherings involve slow processions up the hills crowned by the Church of Mary or the volcano, followed by circumambulation of the crater lake. Before entering the church, the sovereign would be greeted by bishops and the ululations of women. He would circumambulate the sanctuary multiple times, being anointed with perfumes and sometimes accosted by an enthusiastic crowd that his guards protected by wielding truncheons. Within the church, women afflicted with sterility awaited his presence, and the religious service proceeded undisturbed behind the iconostasis. As is customary throughout Ethiopia, only a small portion of the congregation, adhering to stringent criteria of ritual purity in accordance with Mosaic law, participated in the mass. Outside, cattle circled the sanctuary, while lively songs and dances accompanied by *dabtara*<sup>215</sup> playing drums and lyres continued into the night<sup>216</sup>.

Under the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974), Ethiopia witnessed the dominance of a Byzantine-Christian-inspired imperial ideology in national politics<sup>217</sup>. Unfortunately, this led to the denial of full citizenship rights

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<sup>215</sup> See glossary.

<sup>216</sup> Gascon, A. & Hirsch, B. (1992). Les espaces sacrés comme lieux de confluence religieuse en Éthiopie (Shrines Where Religions Meet in Ethiopia). *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 32(128), 696.

<sup>217</sup> Abbink, J. (2011). Religion in public spaces: emerging Muslim-Christian polemics in Ethiopia. *African Affairs*, 110(439), 259.

to Muslims, who endured widespread discrimination, including exclusion from legal landownership and high-level public employment. In fact, the government of Haile Selassie systematically excluded Muslims from high-level political and military positions. The marginalization of Muslims <sup>218</sup> was to some degree reduced during the Derg period (1974-1991), partly because the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, former state religion and large land owner, lost its political influence as well as its land because of the politics of nationalization. Religion as such was pushed out of the public sphere, yet continued to play an important role in the expression of social identity. The challenge of establishing a common civic identity remained unresolved as the Christian foundation and political symbolism of the state hindered the full integration of Ethiopians from diverse religious backgrounds.

After 1944, there was a recognition of Islamic courts <sup>219</sup>, particularly for personal, family, and inheritance matters, without persecution or conversion campaigns aimed at Muslims. In day-to-day interactions, relations between Muslims and Christians tended to be harmonious, perhaps due in part to mutual unfamiliarity with each other's religious beliefs. Emperor Haile Selassie I (1892-1975)s famously attributed with the saying, "The country is a public matter, religion is a private matter".

While this principle was ostensibly healthy for state affairs, the Emperor himself did not fully adhere to it, as he maintained Orthodox Christianity as the de facto state religion. He discouraged political expression by Ethiopian Muslims

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<sup>218</sup> According to Abbas and other scholars, this conquest sowed the seeds of the failure of the project for a modern Ethiopian nation-state, despite forty years of tactical manoeuvres by Emperor Haile Selassie to develop a modern and inclusive state that would encompass the various ethnic groups under a program of Amharization (primarily from a linguistic perspective). In this context, Islam did not play a defining role in the formation of the national identity in Ethiopia and remained secondary under his regime, although some restrictions were gradually lifted regarding political participation, education, and the celebration of religious holidays. In this century, Ethiopia has experienced two brief but significant episodes concerning the inherent tension between Islam and national identity or integration, during the interlude of Lij Yasu and the Italian occupation.

<sup>219</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 259.

as Muslims but allowed them to freely practice their faith. In the 1950s, the Emperor even oversaw the translation of the Haile into Amharic and its publication. Nevertheless, Ethiopian-Orthodox dominance persisted, imposing limitations on Islamic self-expression and organization.

During Emperor Haile Selassie's reign, although there were Muslim publications, no major religious polemical literature emerged that caused significant public controversy. However, at the local level, polemical works and preaching by both Muslims and Christians were likely produced regularly, as evidenced by an unpublished critique of the Orthodox faith by Shaykh Sa'id Ahmad of Dabat in Borana-Wollo.

In retrospect, Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974)'s era provided early indications of the internal Muslim debate concerning the nature of Islamic renewal and "which Islam" to follow, a debate that erupted in the post-1991 years. This debate was foreshadowed by the rivalry between two Ethiopian Muslim religious figures: Shaykh Abdallah ibn Muhammad al Harari, a proponent of Sufist-oriented Islam and religious coexistence, and Shaykh Yusuf t'Abd al-Rahman, a Saudi-Arabia-trained Salafist-Wahhabist-leaning leader. Both lived outside Ethiopia for extended periods, at times facing government bans. They influenced religious discourse through their writings and activities, sparking a "verbal warfare" in the 1990s, rooted in Islamic theology. This rivalry persisted into the post-1991 period and continued to shape Islamic polemical exchanges in Ethiopia, representing the two ends of the theological debate.

As per Abbas and other scholars, this conquest planted the seeds of failure for the project of a modern Ethiopian nation-state, despite Emperor Haile Selassie's forty years of tactics aimed at developing a modern and inclusive state that would encompass diverse ethnic groups through a process of linguistic Amharization primarily. In this Ethiopian context, Islam did not play a defining role in shaping national identity and remained in a subordinate position under

his regime, although some restrictions were gradually lifted, such as political participation, access to education, and the celebration of religious festivals <sup>220</sup>.

Another significant episode in the historical interactions between Ethiopian Muslims and the state, particularly concerning their relationships with Christian populations, occurred during the Italian occupation. This period of turmoil witnessed the targeting of Ethiopian Christians, particularly those belonging to the educated elite and the Amhara ethnic group, for harsh repression. The Amhara, who had dispersed across various regions of the country and had acquired land and resources, often at the expense of the indigenous inhabitants, faced dismissals, expropriation, and forced displacement by the Italian government in many areas. Additionally, the exploitative peasant labor corvée system known as *gabbar*, which still persisted in several regions, was abolished by the Italians. This reform was perceived as a form of liberation by many in the rural underclass.

The above quotations demonstrate that, far from being inspired by any altruistic and libertarian sentiment or genuine sympathy for Islam and the desire to improve the lot of Ethiopian Muslims, the Fascist pro-Muslim policy was principally motivated by a strategy of exploiting Christian-Muslim antagonism and rewarding Muslims for their collaboration with the invaders. On the part of the indigenous Muslims, their pro-Italian attitude was justified by their perception of the Fascists as instruments for ending their religious oppression rather than by a belief in the inherent virtues of, and preference for colonial rule<sup>221</sup>.

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<sup>220</sup> Abbink, J. (1998). An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11, 116.

<sup>221</sup> Ahmed H., *Italian Colonial Policy Towards Islam in Ethiopia and the Responses of Ethiopian Muslims (1936-1941)*, in Negash, T. & Carcangiu, B. M. (2007). *Africa orientale italiana nel dibattito storico contemporaneo*. Roma: Carocci, 101.

The Italians systematically favoured Muslims in Ethiopia over Christians during this period. They granted Muslims full freedom of religion, encouraged Islamic education, introduced Arabic-medium schools, constructed fifty new mosques, and provided financial support to Muslim leaders. Consequently, the Italian policies found widespread acceptance among the Muslim population in Ethiopia, which, in turn, did not endear them to the Ethiopians who were fighting for national liberation.

The challenges of integration and the fragile ideological foundation of the unitary state were further exposed during the guerrilla war waged by the Patriots (Ethiopian resistance fighters in the provinces) against the Italian occupation. The majority of these Ethiopian Patriot forces were Christian highlanders. Following several engagements with the Italians, retreating Ethiopian Patriot forces faced attacks and fatalities at the hands of Muslim Oromo communities, such as in Wollo. The Oromo, armed and instigated by the Italians, viewed the Italo-Ethiopian war as unrelated to their interests and considered the highland Christians as much their adversaries as the Italians. Such incidents exacerbated the animosity of highland Christians toward the “untrustworthy Muslims” in the lowlands <sup>222</sup>.

The Ethiopian War of 1935-36 is notable for the use of weapons and methods prohibited by the Geneva Convention. The Abyssinians employed deadly dum-dum bullets and were known to castrate white and black prisoners, known as Ascari, while the Italians used gas. The war began on October 3, 1935, when General De Bono's troops crossed the Mareb River. In a matter of days, the advance proceeded victoriously, and Italian forces conquered Tigray. It is worth recalling that the year's corresponding to Menelik's rise marked a historical period during which Ethiopia relied on rudimentary weapons like

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<sup>222</sup> Abbink, J. (1998). An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11, 117.



spears and needed more advanced arms initially supplied by Italy and later by other Powers.

Regarding Italy, there was no significant interest from the major industries in the military sector, as would happen under the Giolitti Government on the eve of 1915. Military orders were virtually absent, the conscription period was long, and the volunteer was a defining figure in an army that was not yet solid, unprepared to wage a national-traditional war and ensure internal order in the country. It's important to note that aviation did not exist at the time, which meant there were no reconnaissance flights or bombing missions. Large-scale field radiography and military automobiles for warfare purposes were also non-existent. Internationally, Italy was as if it "did not exist", preoccupied with internal organization and unable to aspire to power and colonization logic, incapable of looking beyond the confines of its insecure borders. The activity of the Anglo-French powers prompted Italy to reevaluate the geostrategic importance of the Red Sea and its ports, energizing what were referred to as "clairvoyant spirits". This is where the significance of port geopolitics arises, with Massawa being the clearest example. Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, was simply an absolute monarch in a still-feudal society, largely illiterate, where his person was to be considered "sacred", his dignity "inviolable", and his power "indisputable" according to the constitution.

The first official act carried out by De Bono upon his arrival in those lands was the abolition of slavery. On October 14, 1935, in Adua, he promulgated the decree that outlawed slavery (not the only one but the most well-known) throughout the Tigray region, publishing it in Italian and Amharic.

People of Tigray, hear this:

You know that where the Italian flag flies, there is freedom. Therefore, in your country, slavery in any form is abolished. The slaves currently in Tigray are free, and the buying and selling of slaves are prohibited.

Anyone who violates the provisions of this decree will be severely punished as a violator of the government's orders.

Given in Adua on October 14, 1935- XIII E.F.

Nevertheless, the complete abolition of slavery in Ethiopia is credited to the Italians. During their occupation, the Italians issued a decree in April 1936 that liberated over 400,000 slaves in the Galla-Sidamo province. The Italians created employment opportunities for some of the former slaves in the expanding infrastructure of the country. In certain places, including Gimma, they also established freedom villages for liberated slaves, providing plows and oxen to start a new stable life. But without real economic transformation, no ban or ban could erase slavery in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, the complete abolition of slavery in Ethiopia is attributed to the Italians. During their occupation, in April 1936, the Italians issued a decree that liberated over 400,000 slaves in the Galla-Sidamo province. The Italians also provided employment opportunities for some of the former slaves in the expanding infrastructure of the country. In certain locations, including Gimma, they even established freedom villages for liberated slaves, supplying plows and oxen to enable them to start a new and stable life.

Contrary to other regions of Africa, in the northern savanna, missionaries had absolutely no impact on the abolition of slavery, at least not until the 20th century. Ethiopia, in this regard as well, represented a different reality. Maintaining its independence from European control until the 1930s, it retained slavery as a fundamental

characteristic of society, even as international pressures for abolition increased.<sup>223</sup>

Following the era of Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974), marked by a policy of repressive tolerance and only a partial granting of rights to Muslims, the socialist-oriented military regime known as the Derg came to power (1974-1991). “Radicals”, before arriving to power, were known as the Armed Forces Coordinating Committee (AFCC). During this period, there was a deliberate effort to discourage religion in all its forms, with both Christianity and Islam becoming targets of state propaganda and subversion. The regime viewed religion as “false ideology”, “backward” and “anti-development” and it systematically sought to weaken religious institutions<sup>224</sup>.

The initial measures taken aimed at dismantling the privileged position of Christianity. For instance, the Church lost all its land, and its immovable property was confiscated. Religious education in schools was also banned. The regime formulated policies designed to transform the religious culture of the population. However, due to the large number of Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia and the deeply rooted religiosity of most Ethiopians, the regime adopted a policy of coexistence and co-optation. It rhetorically granted religion, particularly Islam, a new public status and equal rights. It recognized the most significant Christian and Islamic religious festivals as public holidays and attempted to provide ceremonial recognition to leaders of both communities, making them appear at state events<sup>225</sup>. Nevertheless, the practical exercise of religion and the social foundation of religion among the general population were discouraged and diverted through various means.

The Qulubi pilgrimage, which was briefly suspended during the atheistic period of the military regime, has since resumed with the same fervour as before,

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<sup>223</sup> Lovejoy, P. E., cit., 124-125, 417.

<sup>224</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 117.

<sup>225</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 117.

even though Mengistu Haile Mariam never participated in it. Until 1987, mandatory meetings in the assemblies were scheduled for Sunday mornings, concurrently with religious services. The mass organizations discouraged observing the significant fifty-day Paschal fast and making references to God in greetings. The military regime refrained from eradicating religious practices, especially after various military offensives. Instead, it sought the favor of the Patriarch and the elected imams in the Sango, the parliament <sup>226</sup>.

The post-1991 regime of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) ushered in a period of political, economic, and cultural liberalization in the country. Religious freedoms were largely restored, although political loyalty, now defined along ethnic lines, remained a requirement. The current head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, known as the Abuna, was appointed after 1991 in a contentious election and hails from the Tigray region, which is the stronghold of the ruling political elite in Ethiopia. Similarly, leaders within the Muslim community are often viewed as loyalists to the regime. However, resistance to such co-optation had already begun within the Muslim community before these leaders assumed power.

The long-standing Supreme Council of Muslim Affairs in Ethiopia and its controversial vice-chairman were challenged by a newly established "Ad Hoc Organizing Committee of Ethiopian Muslim Affairs" which sought to uphold the decision of the Sharia court. Whose role had been declared invalid by the Sharia court but who had nonetheless remained in their position. Witnesses present at the Mosque reported that when the removed vice-chairman (who supported the government) entered the Mosque that day accompanied by an armed secretary, there was an immediate outcry of protest. On February 21, 1995, a violent incident occurred within the compound of the al-Anwar Mosque in Addis Ababa, the largest in the country and the center of the Muslim community. The circumstances surrounding the incident remained unclear, but it led to clashes between worshipers and the police, who resorted to using firearms. In the ensuing violence, nine people were killed, and 129 others were

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<sup>226</sup> Gascon, A. & Hirsch, B., cit., 696.

wounded. Regrettably, there was never an independent judicial inquiry into the incident. The ultimate outcome of this conflict was the consolidation of the position of regime loyalists. While the conflict may have originated from internal issues, the government swiftly intervened with what appeared to be an excessive use of force. These events suggest that a process of co-optation of organized Islam continued under the new political regime.

Muslims have been marginalized by the Christian political elites in social and political terms within the Ethiopian polity. Political reforms since the 1970s have significantly redressed the issue of religious inequality in Ethiopia. The secularist turn since the revolution in 1974 brought an end to a state-religion in the history of the country. Islam also attained greater visibility in the public sphere in post-1991 Ethiopia, evident in the recognition of Muslim holidays as national holidays, the construction of many mosques, recognition of the Islamic heritage of the country, as well as greater articulation of Ethiopian Muslims with the wider Islamic world, thanks to the lifting of the ban on imported religious texts and the new freedom of movement.

“Post-socialist” Ethiopia prompted the government and members of the Christian population to view Islamic revivalism primarily through a “national security” lens. According to David Shinn, “Prime Minister Meles Zenawi commented in the mid-1990s that the most significant long-term threat to Ethiopia’s security is Islamic fundamentalism”. Ethiopia’s invasion of Somalia to oust the Islamic Courts Union (IUC) in 2006 and the political alliance between Somalia’s Islamists and Eritrea since then have also heightened the government’s preoccupation with security. The Derg regime, moreover, declared three Islamic holidays as national holidays, and allowed Muslims to de facto establish the umbrella organization Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) in 1976, but the organization was not accepted de jure until 1991. However, the Derg regime, like many other socialist regimes, viewed religion in general as detrimental. For the Muslims it meant that the import of religious literature, communication with the outside, and the pilgrimage to Mecca were highly restricted, as Rashid Moten wrote in 1993. Many Muslims associate the Derg period with civil war, the Red Terror, forced deportations, and a religious

vacuum, which led, as in many post-socialist countries, to a rapid revitalization of religion after 1991.

Since the 1980s, the process of “Othering” by a dominant Christian elite gradually became countered by Muslims who sought to rewrite Ethiopian history in a more differentiated manner- acknowledging the role of Muslims. Common themes in such works have been the focus of marginalization of Muslims in Ethiopia and the historical developments of Muslim communities in the different regions. In a more public sense, the deconstruction of Ethiopian history as a Christian history was based on arguments of the narrative of al-Najashi. Similar to former Ethiopian regimes, which legitimated their authority religiously and politically through (historical events in the *Kebra Nagast*, Muslims started to build a bridge to important events in Islamic history: In particular, the Axumite hijra was used as a key reference to legitimate their position as participants and citizens of Ethiopia.

Moreover, the current regime of Ethiopia defines the public and the state as secular. While religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, political parties on religious grounds are strictly forbidden.

The change of government in 1991 added a new dimension to the dynamic of Muslim public presence. Since the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) certified religious freedom, the appearance of Islam in Ethiopia changed dramatically. New mosques mushroomed throughout the country, while the newly acquired freedom of press formed a market for Islamic magazines and newspapers. However, the new public presence of Muslims and their voices, which reflected the struggle for recognition and participation, fuelled new fears of Islam within the Christian community. In particular, new reform groups that emerged in the early 1990s were observed suspiciously and often condemned as being fundamentalist or as influenced by the Saudi Arabian. In defining Ethiopian Muslims as being a part of home grown Islam, the government integrated so-called moderate, indigenous Muslims in the project of national unity and re-addresses Islam as part of Ethiopian history.

### Chapter 3 - Religious Identities and Coexistence in Ethiopia

Quranic schools helped the Muslim communities to develop Islamic culture in Bagemdir and elsewhere in the Christian highlands. The Quranic schools played an important role in the preservation of Islamic precepts, conformity with the revealed law (the sharia) and the Prophet's tradition (sunnah). Most of the students Who completed their Quranic education became merchants and artisans. They served in the development of commerce and artisanship. The commercial activities of the Muslims constituted the *raison d'être* of their survival in Christian Bagemdir. Some of the students became teachers in the Quranic schools.<sup>227</sup>

Although Ethiopia has a history of religious polemics, a new and potentially challenging dynamic has emerged. This dynamic may pose challenges not only to mainstream believers but also to their intergroup social interactions and the policies of the Ethiopian state. These polemics in Ethiopia serve as vehicles for asserting hegemonic strategies and claims to power, rapidly evolving into a pervasive ideological phenomenon within the public domain. In light of this, it becomes imperative for the secular state to reaffirm itself more emphatically in order to counteract its erosion in the face of assertive religious challenges. Religious identities are gaining prominence as individuals' primary public identifiers, assuming a more ideological character. This evolving trend carries significant implications for the public sphere, where religious identities are presently presented and contested in a self-consciously polemical manner.

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<sup>227</sup> Ahmad, A. H. (1996). Trade and Islam in the Towns of Bagemdir 1900-1935. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 29(2), 13.

It is evident that the issue of the collective role and identity of Ethiopian Muslims within a predominantly “Christian state” has never been definitively resolved. Interestingly, historical patterns of conflict and conquest in the border regions between Christianity and Islam during the Ethiopian Middle Ages, particularly in Eastern Scioa, Wollo, and Eritrea, as well as the fluid boundaries of Islamic and Christian influence, have given rise to a distinctive pattern of “flexible” religious identification in the country. This phenomenon persists in various regions to this day.

Over the course of an individual’s lifetime, it is not uncommon for people to convert from their religion of birth to either Christianity or Islam and back again. Social factors driving these conversions include marriage, trade relationships, migration to areas predominantly inhabited by adherents of the other religion, and, in contemporary times, ethnic or political affiliations.

This cultural phenomenon defined by Abbink as “religious oscillation”<sup>228</sup> has not yet been subject to systematic study but holds significant scholarly interest. It not only illustrates the diverse forms that Islamic religious culture can assume within an African context (similar patterns are found in parts of Nigeria, Cameroon, and Mali), but also invites exploration into the nature of religiosity, both Islamic and Christian, and the conditions of coexistence and non-exclusivist religious identification in the context of religions typically considered exclusive and, in the case of Islam, intolerant of conversion to another faith.

The enduring cultural ties between Ethiopian Christians, Muslims, and other groups, coupled with issues related to land inheritance, social organization, and kinship structures, likely underlie the prevalence of religious oscillation and the religious tolerance associated with it. Another contributing factor may be the limited influence of urban-based “scriptural religion” as defined and propagated by the ulema class, who often hailed from Arab-Islamic centers of learning.

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<sup>228</sup> Abbink, J. (1998). An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11, 119.



Notably, this class and significant urban centers were largely absent from pre-twentieth century Ethiopia, with the exception of Harar.

At present, the Muslim community comprises a substantial portion of the Ethiopian population, with approximately one in three Ethiopians adhering to Islam. This demographic estimation has been consistently upheld since the initial statistical surveys conducted in the 1960s and has continued to be confirmed by national censuses since 1984. The most recent census in 2007 reported that 33.9 percent of Ethiopians, equivalent to 25 million individuals out of a total population of 74 million, identified as Muslims. This represented a modest increase from the 32.8 percent recorded in the 1994 census. Nevertheless, there has been some debate regarding the accuracy of this consistently stable one-third proportion. Certain observers have asserted that this figure is an underestimated representation, consistently propagated by Ethiopian authorities and foreign scholars. A few online commentators have even suggested that Muslims might constitute the majority of Ethiopia's population. However, such claims are typically made without substantial factual evidence to support them<sup>229</sup>.

From a religious distribution standpoint, Ethiopia can be categorized into three primary regions. The eastern regions, such as Afar, Somali, and eastern Oromiya, are predominantly Muslim, while the northwestern regions, Tigray and Amhara, are predominantly Orthodox Christian. Protestant Christians are concentrated in the southwest, particularly within the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) and Gambella. It is essential to acknowledge that this simplified representation conceals the more intricate dynamics of interreligious coexistence experienced by a significant number of Ethiopians, particularly in urban centers and densely populated rural areas. A closer examination of the Muslim population within each region reveals varying circumstances. Nearly the entire populations of the Afar and Somali regions adhere to Islam, constituting 95 percent and 98 percent, respectively. In contrast,

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<sup>229</sup> Ficquet, É. (2015). *The Ethiopian Muslims: historical processes and ongoing controversies*. in Prunier, G. & Ficquet, É. (2015). *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*. C. Hurst & Co, 93-94.

Muslims represent a small minority in Tigray, accounting for just 4 percent of the population. In Amhara, the percentage is higher at 17 percent, with a significant concentration in the eastern districts of Wollo and Scioa, adjacent to the Afar and Oromiya regions. Similarly, in SNNPR, Muslims constitute 14 percent of the population, primarily in the northeastern areas bordering Oromiya, particularly within the Gurage and Silte zones. In the Benishangul Gumuz Region, which shares a border with Sudan, Muslims comprise 45 percent of the population. Oromiya boasts the largest Muslim population, constituting 48 percent of the region's inhabitants, with Oromo Muslims accounting for 51 percent of all Ethiopian Muslims. They are concentrated in regions including Gimma, Illubabor, Arsi, Bale, and the vicinity of Harar.

In recent years, while the size of the Muslim population has remained relatively stable in relative terms, their visibility has notably increased in the public sphere, giving rise to the impression of a sudden surge in their numbers. This is evident through various developments, including relaxed regulations concerning mosque construction, the growing prevalence of Muslim attire (such as the *hijab* for women and *gamis* for men) in public spaces, and the frequent playing of Islamic spiritual songs in Arabic and Ethiopian languages on loudspeakers in Muslim-owned music shops. These public expressions of Islamic identity mark a significant departure from the past. Subsequent sections will delve into the evolution of the situation of Ethiopian Muslims, tracing their journey from a minority group to their ongoing struggle for recognition and civil rights.

The constitutional journey from imperial rule under Emperor Haile Selassie to the Marxist-Leninist government of the Derg in the 1970s marked a seismic shift. Subsequent to the Derg's rule, Ethiopia has grappled with a series of constitutional reforms, leading to the current era of governance under the 1995 Constitution. This constitution introduced a federal system, acknowledging the diverse ethnic groups within the nation. More recently, Ethiopia has witnessed renewed constitutional debates and challenges, reflecting its ongoing quest for a democratic and inclusive political framework. This first paragraph sets the stage for an exploration of Ethiopia's constitutional evolution up to the

present day, reflecting its enduring commitment to adapt to changing societal dynamics and aspirations.

The “lost generation” in Africa, as discussed by Donal Cruise O’Brien, is typically dated from the rupture of relatively comfortable socialization procedures during the 1960s to the late 1970s. However, the Ethiopian context presents a unique scenario. In Ethiopia, three distinct political periods in modern history, the Imperial period, the Derg period, and the post-Derg period played fundamental roles in shaping different young generations<sup>230</sup>. Each successive regime aimed to mold the future according to its ideological vision while discrediting the ideologies of its predecessors.

The 1974 revolution marked the end of centuries-long feudal monarchy, ushering in the Marxist-inspired Derg regime. Religion faced severe restrictions during the Derg regime. Religious propagation was banned, and religious practices and prayers were discouraged. The regime aimed to confine religion to the private sphere. Consequently, younger generations in schools were ill-equipped to engage with religious ideas, which led to a decline in religious identity and practices in certain regions. Overall, the process of Marxist-inspired modernization marginalized religion and weakened religious identity in Bale, Ethiopia. This era saw the erosion of religious boundaries and a decline in religious adherence and practices. While secularism was a core aspect of the regime’s political ideology, the effects of secularization varied among the population, resulting in complex and sometimes contradictory outcomes. Despite the military takeover and the subsequent authoritarian turn, the youth were portrayed as instrumental in creating a Marxist-inspired Ethiopia. They were instrumental in spreading the ideals of the revolution, particularly during the early *zemetcha*<sup>231</sup> campaign when young students were dispatched throughout the country to educate farmers about the revolution’s principles. The past was depicted as feudal and regressive, and the older generation was seen as

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<sup>230</sup> Østebø, T. (2016). *Being young, being Muslim in Bale* in Desplat & Østebø T. (2016). *Muslim Ethiopia: the Christian legacy identity politics and Islamic reformism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>231</sup> See glossary.

representing a backward era. The overarching goal of the regime was to modernize Ethiopia, positioning it as an economically progressive nation.

This era came to an end in 1991 when the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and other ethnic-based resistance movements assumed power under the banner of the new Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Each of these political transitions brought about significant ruptures, both real and perceived, which shaped the expectations and social realities of the successive young generations.

Although education began expanding gradually from the 1960s, benefiting a select group of youth, the entrenched feudal structure hindered their access to positions of power. Combined with a scarcity of job opportunities for the growing number of young graduates, these circumstances radicalized the youth during the 1960s, making them instrumental in the 1974 revolution.

This modernization process was heavily reliant on expanding secular education, leading to a growing number of schools during the Derg period. However, this "democratization of secular schooling" not only provided new empirical insights but also offered alternative knowledge narratives, ultimately challenging traditional structures. Modern education emerged as a distinct avenue of socialization, surpassing the family's role in transmitting knowledge and reshaping the younger generation's awareness of local traditions.

### 3.1 Constitutional Amendments, Reforms and Public Space

A fundamental moment in Ethiopia's commitment to abolishing slavery occurred in 1923 when Emperor Tafari pledged to adhere to Article 11, paragraph 1, of the Convention revising the Berlin General Act of 1885 and the Brussels Declaration of 1890<sup>232</sup>. This commitment aimed at conserving and supervising indigenous peoples, ultimately leading to the gradual abolition of slavery. Emperor Tafari took a definitive stance against the slave trade by issuing an edict on September 28, 1923, condemning individuals involved in buying or selling slaves. Moreover, on March 31, 1924, another edict was decreed, stipulating that all slaves would be granted their freedom seven years after the death of their masters, and all future unborn children would be considered free individuals. Despite these efforts, the persistence of slavery in Ethiopia remained a pressing concern. In 1932, the Office for the Repression of Slavery was established in Addis Ababa, signifying a continued commitment to combating slavery. Nevertheless, this deeply entrenched practice persisted. International scrutiny intensified, with organizations like the British Anti-Slavery Society conducting investigations known as the Buxton-Polwart investigations. Furthermore, the League of Nations Commission for the Fight Against Slavery collected extensive documents on the matter.

In 1935, the Italian Government presented a "Memorandum on the Situation in Ethiopia" to the League of Nations, shedding light on the persistence of slavery in the country. Eradicating slavery in Ethiopia proved to be a complex endeavor, as it required not only legislative measures but also substantial economic transformation. The centralization and authoritarian rule

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<sup>232</sup> The decline of the slave trade phenomenon in Ethiopia can be traced back to the proactive measures taken by various Ethiopian princes. Notably, in 1855, Emperor Tewodros promulgated edicts against slavery, setting an important precedent<sup>232</sup>. This marked the beginning of a series of significant developments aimed at eradicating slavery within the country. Subsequent rulers, including Yohannes IV and Menelik, continued this trend by reinforcing anti-slavery policies.

of Emperor Haile Selassie, which endured for approximately sixty years, faced challenges from religious coexistence and ethno-political diversity.

In the Ethiopian Constitution of 1931, the specific articles related to freedom, religion, or Muslims are not explicitly mentioned. This constitution primarily focuses on matters related to the structure of government, powers of the Emperor, organization of chambers, and budgeting. The period of Ethiopian constitutional development spanning from 1930 to 1974 witnessed substantial transformations when compared to the pre-1931 era, particularly within Emperor Haile Selassie's regime. In the revised Ethiopian Constitution promulgated by Emperor Haile Selassie I (1892-1975) on November 1955, significant changes were introduced to the governance of the Ethiopian Empire. This revised constitution was primarily aimed at enhancing Ethiopia's standing on the international stage. While it did consolidate the Emperor's absolute authority, it also incorporated key concepts such as the separation of powers and expanded the responsibilities of the Ethiopian parliament. The introduction of the separation of powers marked a notable departure from the earlier governance structure. This concept sought to delineate distinct roles and functions for the various branches of government, including the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. As a result, it aimed to establish a more balanced and accountable system of governance. Furthermore, the revised constitution extended the role of the Ethiopian parliament. This expansion in parliamentary functions was intended to foster greater representation and participation in the decision-making processes of the nation. It signalled a shift towards a more inclusive and democratic approach to governance, even within the framework of an imperial system.

1931 Constitution and the 1955 Revised Constitution are structured into seven chapters; however, the composition of their respective articles differs significantly. The 1931 Constitution comprises 55 articles, while the 1955 Revised Constitution is more extensive, consisting of 131 articles. Although these constitutional documents do not represent complete constitutionalism, they nonetheless laid the groundwork for modern political and legal structures

in Ethiopia<sup>233</sup>. One notable aspect that remained consistent across both constitutions was the position of the emperor, albeit with some modifications concerning human and democratic rights, parliamentary freedom, ministerial independence, and the judiciary. These constitutional changes, backed by the authority of the emperor, led to the apex of imperial absolutism, eventually fuelling discontent among intellectuals and students.

In the first chapter of the 1931 constitution, emphasis is placed on matters related to the Ethiopian empire and the succession to the throne. This chapter elaborates on these aspects through five articles, with a particular focus on the emperor's authority over the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. Article five explicitly states that "the supreme power of the empire rests in the hands of the emperor", a sentiment reaffirmed by article six.

In contrast, the 1955 Revised Constitution dedicates an entire chapter to these subjects, providing a more detailed exposition than the 1931 Constitution. This chapter comprises twenty-five articles, five of which are directly borrowed from the earlier constitution. Articles 3, 5, 6, and 7 delve into the intricacies of succession to the throne, while article 4 reinforces the sanctity, inviolability, and indisputability of the emperor's person. Significantly, the 1955 Revised Constitution grants authority to a crown council to make decisions regarding regency and succession in specific circumstances.

Embedded within the legal framework of the Ethiopian Empire are Articles 40 and 41, which hold profound significance in safeguarding the rights and liberties of its citizens. Article 40 explicitly addresses the freedom to practice one's religion without interference, provided such practices remain within the boundaries of the law and do not pose threats to public order or morality.

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<sup>233</sup> Gelana Debisa, N. (2021). Ethiopian Constitutional Experience Under Emperor Haile Selassie's Regime: Comparative Analysis of 1931 Constitution and 1955 Revised Constitution. *Innovations*, 67, 119-127.

#### ARTICLE 40

- 1- There shall be no interference with the exercise, in accordance with the law, of the rites of any religion or creed by residents of the Empire, provided that such rites are not utilized for political
- 2- purposes or prejudicial to public order or morality.

Meanwhile, Article 41 guarantees the freedom of speech and press, emphasizing their protection within the framework of the law. In this article, we delve into the nuanced interpretations and implications of these constitutional provisions, exploring how they shape the dynamics of religious coexistence and the exercise of free expression in contemporary Ethiopia.

#### ARTICLE 41

Freedom of speech and of the press is guaranteed throughout the Empire in accordance with the law.

The 1955 Revised Constitution, while it aimed to modernize Ethiopia's governance and enhance its international reputation, ultimately faced the challenge of a rapidly changing political landscape, culminating in its demise during the tumultuous events of 1974. However, the promising changes brought about by the 1955 Revised Constitution were short-lived. In the urban regions of Ethiopia, a profound transformation occurred with the advent of a revolutionary movement led by the military. This movement ostensibly championed the cause of the rural peasantry, yet the lofty pledges made by the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), commonly known as the Derg, to initiate rural development and instigate meaningful land reforms have, regrettably, remained unfulfilled promises. In 1974, the Ethiopian Revolution



unfolded, resulting in the abolition of the monarchy by the Derg, a Marxist-Leninist military junta. This revolutionary upheaval led to the abrogation of the constitution and marked a turning point in Ethiopian history, with profound implications for the nation's political structure and governance. Emperor Selassie ruled Ethiopia until 1974, when civil unrest led to a Marxist *coup d'état* orchestrated by Lt. Col. Mengistu, resulting in the overthrow of Selassie and the installation of a socialist military regime. Supported by the Soviet Union, Mengistu's government ushered in a totalitarian era marked by extensive militarization. The period from 1977 to 1979, known as the "Red Terror", was marred by the torture and execution of thousands of perceived enemies. These challenges manifested through regional liberation movements, with the Eritrean secessionist movement gaining momentum in 1960, initially driven by Muslim groups and later joined by Christian and armed factions<sup>234</sup>. Religious movements in Ethiopia evolved, incorporating communist and revolutionary ideologies, while advocating for the recognition of various rights and their effective implementation. Muslims sought to be acknowledged as "Ethiopians" on equal footing with other citizens, emphasizing their identity as "Ethiopian Muslims" rather than merely "Muslims living in Ethiopia"<sup>235</sup>.

The formal acquisition of authority by the PMAC was established through Proclamation No. 1 of 1974 (Neg. Gaz. 34/1). This proclamation not only deposed the Emperor but also suspended the 1955 Revised Constitution, albeit preserving the applicability of all other extant laws and regulations. In practical terms, the entire legal framework of the nation remained in a state of "suspension"<sup>236</sup>. The Derg, a prominent military junta, rejected the 1974 Draft Constitution. The decision to suspend the 1955 Constitution, as opposed to repealing it outright, was driven by a pursuit of legal coherence. The emergence

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<sup>234</sup> Erlich, H. (1977). The Eritrean Secessionist Movement: An Inside Review. *The World Today*, 33(1), 13-21.

<sup>235</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, & Marcus, H. G. (1994). *New Trends and Developments in the Ethiopian Muslim Community: Conference Highlights*. *Northeast African Studies*, 1(3), 775-801.

<sup>236</sup> Scholler, H., & Brietzke, P. (1975). Law and politics in revolutionary Ethiopia. *Verfassung Und Recht in Übersee / Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, 8(2), 183.

of a novel legislative process spearheaded by the Derg inherently clashed with the existing constitutional provisions. To preclude any potential constitutional challenges, suspension was chosen as a pragmatic recourse. The choice of the term “suspended” holds profound implications. It signifies the initial perception within the Derg that its authority was of a temporary nature. Consequently, this term conveys the notion of a transitional phase rather than an outright abandonment of the established constitutional framework. Moreover, the Derg’s Proclamations retained key institutional elements, adding layers of complexity to this momentous historical and legal transformation.

The Mengistu era witnessed significant transformations in Ethiopia. The nationalization<sup>237</sup> of land in February 1975, a policy that still presents unresolved challenges, contributed to a high domestic demand for slaves. Slavery was perpetuated, often driven by the need for labor in border wars and clan conflicts. Historical records reveal that famines have historically triggered fundamental socio-political changes in Ethiopian society. The famine of the 1970s, for instance, fuelled the revolution and the demand for change. Conversely, the famine of 1890 led some northern Christian families to sell their children to Muslim merchants.

Nonetheless, positive developments emerged after 1974, particularly concerning the treatment of Muslims, democratic ideals, violence, and international engagement. There was a notable improvement in the treatment of the Muslim population, who gained formal recognition as both *de jure* and *de facto* “citizens”. This transformation held particular significance, considering that Muslims had been relegated to “second-class citizen” status since the 16th century.

The Derg regime, in its pursuit of secularism since September 1974, aimed to create an environment where the rights of all citizens would be respected.

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<sup>237</sup> Clapham, C. (1989). The State and Revolution in Ethiopia. *Review of African Political Economy*, 44, *passim*.

When compared to the 1955 Constitution, Arts. 21- 59 of the Draft contain a more extensive and precisely-defined catalogue of human rights [...]. It is therefore surprising that one of the Derg's stated reasons for rejecting the Draft Constitution was the need to more fully ensure human rights. Under Arts. 111- 113, human rights could have been abridged upon a declaration of a state of emergency or defensive war, or proclamation of military administration. [...]. A significant omission, when compared to Art. 44 of the 1955 Constitution, is the absence of a guaranteed right of property ownership, which was to be "within the limits of the law" (Art. 136). No mention is made of the right to dispose of property or procedural safeguards against unwarranted expropriations, except for payment of a legally determined just compensation (Art. 136). Several interesting provisions should be mentioned. Art. 55 recognizes the right to free education, health care and retirement benefits, "the level of development and wealth of the country permitting". The duties of citizens are also prescribed; the payment of taxes, the education of children by their parents to at least primary level (Arts. 52, 56 - 57) and, in addition to obeying the Constitution, "(e)very Ethiopian has the duty to defend the country and the society against all enemies and to perform public services . . ." (Art. 51). This provision implies the draftsmen's recognition of an emerging class struggle and the ongoing identification of enemies of society<sup>238</sup>.

However, this approach often translated into negative consequences for different religious denominations. Property confiscation, under the banner of political collectivization programs, affected both Christians and Muslims. The Orthodox Church saw its vast land holdings confiscated, while Muslims had their profitable businesses seized.

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<sup>238</sup> Scholler, H., & Brietzke, P., cit., 189.

In 1987, the Derg, under Mengistu's leadership, officially embraced communism, adopting a communist constitution. However, the oppressive regime spurred rebel groups like the TPLF and the EPRDF to unite and eventually overthrow Mengistu in 1991. The Derg's fall also led to Eritrea declaring its independence from Ethiopia.

The EPRDF and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) in 1991, followed by the 1992 elections. In 1994, Ethiopia adopted its current constitution, establishing the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's 1994 constitution reflects a policy of "ethnic democracy" pursued by the government. Ethnicity plays a central role in the nation's politics, driving the constitutional structure, which includes a two-tiered federal system<sup>239</sup>. In addition to the central government, Ethiopia comprises nine regional states with boundaries largely aligned with ethnic divisions, cementing ethnicity as a key factor in Ethiopian politics<sup>240</sup>.

Following the ousting of the Derg regime by the EPRDF in 1991, religious freedoms expanded further, albeit often for political reasons. The new rulers recognized the importance of respecting the sensibilities and faith of their citizens. Religious pluralism became essential not only for political consensus but also to align with the government's philosophy of ethno-regional federalism. Article 27 of the new constitution<sup>241</sup>, adopted in late 1994, allowed religious communities to openly express themselves in the public sphere, fostering equality and unity<sup>242</sup>.

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<sup>239</sup> Smith, J. (2005). Ethiopia's Constitutional Evolution. *Journal of African History*, 45(2), 123-145.

<sup>240</sup> The first elections under this constitution took place in 1995, with many opposition parties boycotting due to exclusion from the constitutional process. The EPRDF's dominant role in the transitional period led to its electoral victory.

<sup>241</sup> Constitute, *Ethiopia 1994*, 2023, in <https://www.constituteproject.org>

<sup>242</sup> Hausteijn, J., & Østebø, T. (2011). *Being 'Born-Again' in the Rift Valley: The Impact of Pentecostalism on Practices of Religious Conversion in Ethiopia*. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 41(2), 145-166.

The Ethiopian Constitution of 1994 marks a fundamental moment in the nation's history, reflecting a commitment to fundamental human rights and freedoms. Among these rights is Chapter 3, Article 27, which addresses Freedom of Religion, Belief, and Opinion. This article is significant in the context of Ethiopia's diverse religious landscape, where adherents of Christianity and Islam have coexisted for centuries. In this introduction, it will be explored how Article 27 signifies a victory for religious freedom, particularly for the Muslim community in Ethiopia. It establishes a legal framework that not only recognizes the importance of religious diversity but also ensures that the rights and liberties of all Ethiopians, regardless of their religious beliefs, are protected and respected. This chapter not only enshrines the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion but also underscores the right to manifest one's religion or belief. It allows for the establishment of religious institutions and safeguards against coercion or discrimination based on religious convictions. Moreover, it outlines the conditions under which limitations to religious freedom can be imposed, balancing individual rights with the broader interests of society.

In the context of Ethiopia's historical struggles with religious tensions and conflicts, Article 27 represents a triumph of inclusivity and tolerance. It acknowledges the vital role that religion plays in the lives of Ethiopians while ensuring that the state remains impartial in matters of faith. This chapter exemplifies Ethiopia's commitment to fostering a society where all its citizens, including Muslims, can exercise their religious beliefs freely and without fear of persecution.

#### Article 27. Freedom of Religion, Belief and Opinion

4. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include the freedom to hold or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and the freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

5. Without prejudice to the provisions of sub-Article 2 of Article 90, believers may establish institutions of religious education and administration in order to propagate and organize their religion.
6. No one shall be subject to coercion or other means which would restrict or prevent his freedom to hold a belief of his choice.
7. Parents and legal guardians have the right to bring up their children ensuring their religious and moral education in conformity with their own convictions.
8. Freedom to express or manifest one's religion or belief may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, peace, health, education, public morality or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others, and to ensure the independence of the state from religion.

The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, established in 1994, affirmed the separation between state and religion, the absence of a state religion, and the non-interference of the state in religious affairs, and vice versa as reported in Art. 11. This constitutional framework facilitated the open expression of religious diversity in the public sphere<sup>243</sup>.

#### Article 11. Separation of State and Religion

- 1- State and religion are separate.
- 2- There shall be no state religion.
- 3- The state shall not interfere in religious matters and religion shall not interfere in state affairs.

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<sup>243</sup> Prunier, G., & Ficquet, É. (2015). *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History, 1-36.

The right to be equal before the law is enshrined in Article 25 of the Ethiopian Constitution of 1994:

Article 25. Right to Equality

All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection without discrimination on grounds of race, nation, nationality, or other social origin, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, property, birth or other status.

Article 33 of the Ethiopian Constitution of 1994 stands as a testament to the nation's commitment to upholding the rights and privileges of its citizens regarding nationality. This fundamental article addresses the fundamental principles of nationality, ensuring that no Ethiopian national is involuntarily deprived of their citizenship. Furthermore, it clarifies the impact of marriage between Ethiopian nationals and foreigners on their nationality status and guarantees the right to enjoy the benefits and protections associated with Ethiopian nationality.

Article 33 not only affirms the inviolability of Ethiopian nationality but also recognizes the evolving nature of personal choices and circumstances. The right to change one's nationality is enshrined, reflecting Ethiopia's acknowledgment of the diverse backgrounds and life choices of its citizens. Moreover, it establishes clear guidelines for the conferral of Ethiopian nationality upon foreigners, aligning with international agreements ratified by Ethiopia. In a world where nationality can profoundly impact an individual's access to rights and opportunities, Article 33 represents Ethiopia's commitment

to ensuring that its citizens are empowered to make choices about their nationality without coercion or discrimination. It exemplifies the nation's dedication to inclusivity, equality, and the protection of its citizens' rights.

#### Article 33. Rights of Nationality

- 1- No Ethiopian national shall be deprived of his or her Ethiopian nationality against his or her will. Marriage of an Ethiopian national of either sex to a foreign national shall not annul his or her Ethiopian nationality.
- 2- Every Ethiopian national has the right to the enjoyment of all rights, protection and benefits derived from Ethiopian nationality as prescribed by law.
- 3- Any national has the right to change his Ethiopian nationality.
- 4- Ethiopian nationality may be conferred upon foreigners in accordance with law enacted and procedures established consistent with international agreements ratified by Ethiopia.

Subsequent elections in 2000-2001 were marred by irregularities, leading to limited opposition success. The 2005 elections saw greater fairness but were followed by protests, government crackdowns, and arrests of opposition figures. In 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed initiated constitutional reforms and political openings, marking a significant shift in Ethiopian politics. The Ethiopian constitution creates a federal structure with ethnic representation and includes a bicameral parliamentary system, with the House of Federation maintaining control over states' rights, including the "right to secession". Each state has its legislative, executive, and judicial branches, further emphasizing Ethiopia's commitment to decentralization and ethnic representation.



In Ethiopia, the political landscape underwent a significant transformation following the regime change in 1991, ushering in a comparatively more liberal environment. This shift facilitated the open expression of religious beliefs and practices within the public sphere and allowed local Christian and Muslim organizations to reconnect with global religious trends and engage with foreign organizations and preachers, both Muslim and Evangelical, who sought to reform and promote their respective faiths on a global scale. This phenomenon of global reconnection<sup>244</sup> encompassed interactions with influential religious institutions and funding sources abroad, often emphasizing more ‘fundamentalist’ interpretations of religion. Consequently, this shift has given rise to more doctrinaire positions and symbolic power struggles within the Ethiopian public sphere.

In this evolving landscape, local religious elites and emerging foreign-supported groups, particularly ‘reformist’ Muslim and Evangelical factions, perceive opportunities to enhance their influence and pursue expansion and hegemony. An initial analysis of the emerging religious polemics reveals a changing landscape where ideas of mutual tolerance and cooperation appear to be in flux, if not declining. This shift carries the potential to generate political challenges within Ethiopia, particularly considering the mass appeal of these polemics, fuelled by the intensive use of new media technologies and financial support from global partners. Within Ethiopia, the consequences of this burgeoning religious rivalry extend beyond debates about the nation’s identity, encompassing heightened competition over public spaces, including the construction of mosques, churches, or chapels. Additionally, it manifests in self-presentation in the media and public celebrations. Historically, Ethiopian society has been marked by diversity and inter-religious coexistence, albeit with sporadic instances of religious polemics, sometimes involving those in positions of power, such as emperors and nobles. From a theoretical standpoint, the current religious polemics reflect strategies for hegemony and claims to power, rapidly

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<sup>244</sup> Abbink, J. (2011). Religion in public spaces: emerging Muslim-Christian polemics in Ethiopia. *African Affairs*, 110(439), 255.

evolving as an ideological phenomenon with a relative autonomy from material and socioeconomic factors.

Evident is the resurgence and expansion of Islam in various forms, including Salafism and Tabligh, as well as the proliferation of Pentecostal-Evangelical churches. These religious movements are not only challenging the traditional expressions of faith, such as the more Sufi-oriented Muslim practices and Orthodox Christianity, but also the secular state itself, also the resurgence of Orthodox-Christian belief, notably within the EOC, through movements like Mahbere Qiddusan. However, this resurgence is often a response to external challenges and aims at internal religious renewal while formulating a counter-narrative <sup>245</sup> to the influence of Pentecostal-Evangelical churches.

In large part, this momentum of resurgence after 1991 reflects the genuine search among both Muslims and Christians for spiritually fulfilling life and for community (re)organization after years of oppressive socialism (under the Derg regime of 1974-91).<sup>246</sup>

During the EPRDF regime, significant changes occurred in Ethiopia, impacting both Christians and Muslims. While the regime introduced more

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<sup>245</sup> The intensification of religious competition in Ethiopia has also found its platform on the internet. Numerous websites maintained by Ethiopian Christians and Muslims, especially those in the diaspora, have amplified these religious debates, often adopting biased and provocative stances. Although this aspect is not the primary focus of my research, it undoubtedly warrants comprehensive study in its own right, as its influence on local Ethiopian discourse continues to grow. Internet exchanges have become a significant component of the broader religious discourse, providing valuable insights and inputs for the local context.

<sup>246</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 256.

freedoms, it also exerted greater control<sup>247</sup> over the EOC and marginalized its role in public life.

The post-1991 regime demonstrated increased support for Islam<sup>248</sup>. Under the new constitution of 1995, Ethiopia remained a secular state, although some religious groups, both Christian and Muslim, were reluctant to fully accept this model. With the advent of press freedom, for example, in the early years of the new regime, numerous Islamic periodicals emerged, fostering a renewed sense of self-consciousness among Ethiopian Muslims. These publications featured polemical contributions, often addressing Muslim reform and asserting the rights of Islam. Simultaneously, Christian organizations initiated religious newspapers and publications for broader audiences, including magazines published by the EOC and Pentecostal-Evangelical groups.

It adapted public office hours to accommodate mosque times, solidified the legal status of religious *sharia* courts, and allowed for the expansion of Muslim religious education and mosque construction with foreign funding. Both Christian and Islamic non-governmental organizations, including those from abroad with clear proselytizing aims, emerged. The quota for *hajj*<sup>249</sup> travelers was expanded, and private religious press flourished. A significant number of foreign Islamic and Pentecostal-Evangelical teachers and trainers came to Ethiopia, while many Ethiopian Muslims and Christians received training abroad. This influx of foreign funding and influence raised concerns about potential foreign interference in religious matters. But after an intra-Muslim conflict in 1995 at the Anwar Mosque in Addis Ababa, which resulted in casualties, Muslim organizations came under closer scrutiny.

The political transition that unfolded in 1991 not only provided respite from the challenging era of the Marxist Derg regime but also marked a significant turning point for Ethiopia's Muslim community. The reform process affecting

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<sup>247</sup> In 1992, under government pressure, the EOC Patriarch was replaced by a regime-friendly figure, who remained in power until 2011.

<sup>248</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 260.

<sup>249</sup> See *glossary*.

Muslim societies in Ethiopia has historically started from the societies themselves, thus presenting itself as not homogenous but fragmented and part of the discursive tradition of Islam.

Currently, one of the most interesting issues in Ethiopia is the role of Islamic reform movements and their engagement with long-standing Muslim communities. Reformists reappeared in public during the 1990s and the enduring Christian heritage has created a unique situation compared to other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Reform and debates in Ethiopia, as elsewhere, have been inherent phenomena of Islam. They must be contextualised historically and should not be understood as a mere product of modernity nor reduced to the simple opposition between Sufis and Salafis. Reform had already been initiated in the 19th century in Wollo by Islamic scholars with a Sufi background who opposed other Sufis. Like their predecessors, current Islamic reform movements have generated passionate debates on 'correct Islam' and the question of desecrated cultural practices. The contemporary debates within Muslim societies in Ethiopia do not necessarily differ in intensity, yet the new political and public dimensions and related interests cannot be ignored.

Reforms have focused on the legitimisation of existing religious practices, which also differ according to the Wahhabi and Sufis dichotomy, and on the religious sphere<sup>250</sup>, as well as presenting problems related to the origin of demand: different ethnic groups have presented different reform movements, particularly in the post-1991 period, where identity politics and ethnic federalism have ignited the problem. One of the most famous cases was that of shrines, with a revitalisation process that, however, was not the same for all shrines used by different Muslim communities<sup>251</sup>.

For Islam in Ethiopia, this transition signalled a shift from the periphery of society to increased recognition within the public sphere. The policies enacted

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<sup>250</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 253-74.

<sup>251</sup> Desplat, & Østebø, T. (2016). *Muslim Ethiopia: the Christian legacy identity politics and Islamic reformism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 15.

by the EPRDF aimed to safeguard the rights of the diverse ethnic and religious groups within the country. This approach acknowledged and sought to enhance equality within this diversity. The advent of the new regime brought about a series of transformative changes<sup>252</sup> for the Muslim community. It marked the end of restrictions on *hajj*, lifted the ban on importing religious literature, and removed constraints on the construction of religious schools. The openness following the fall of the Derg regime fostered a heightened sense of identity among Muslims, spurred the emergence of new religious affiliations: numerous Islamic organizations emerged, Islamic schools were founded, and mosques were constructed throughout the country. EIASC which had operated *de facto* since 1974, gained legal recognition in 1991.

In November 1994, a Muslim demonstration in Addis Ababa demanded the inclusion of *sharia* in the constitution, but this was rejected to maintain religious equality and a neutral state. The growth of Islamic and Pentecostal-Evangelical self-expression and organization raised concerns. Some groups threatened Ethiopia's Orthodox-Christian heritage directly, while Christian spokespeople and priests warned against perceived Muslim designs and radicalism. While the internal polemics initially targeted intra-confessional debates within Christianity and Islam, they increasingly turned toward direct challenges between these religious groups. The battle for religious adherence and influence in public space has intensified, potentially impacting the established secular state structure.

The Salafi movement has garnered significant attention in contemporary Ethiopia. Emerged in the southeastern region of the country around 1940 in the town of Harar, introduced by Ethiopians returning from the *hajj*, a trend that surged during the Italian occupation (1935-1942). Among these figures, Shaykh Yusuf Abd al-Rahman of Harar played a key role in spreading Salafism. The growth of khat, as detailed in the first chapter, as a cash crop in Hararge further contributed to the dissemination of Salafism among the Oromo, who returned

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<sup>252</sup> Østebø, T. (2008). The Question of Becoming: Islamic Reform Movements in Contemporary Ethiopia. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 38(4), 416-418.

from the *hajj* to propagate the new teachings among their kin. The growth of Salafism faced significant challenges during the era of the Derg regime, which sought to suppress religious activities. However, the movement's decentralized nature allowed it to persist. With the political transition in 1991, Salafism experienced a resurgence in Oromo-speaking regions such as Bale and Arsi, and it gradually spread to other parts of Ethiopia, including Harar, Gimma, Wollo, and Addis Ababa. The EPRDF's approach to religion created an environment conducive to the public promotion of Salafi teachings. In the capital, the Ethiopian Muslim Youth Association became a prominent advocate of Salafi ideology. Established in the early 1990s and initially loosely connected to Salafism, it became more overtly Salafi-affiliated as funding from Saudi Arabia increased. Other organizations, such as the Islamic Dawah & Knowledge Association and the Awaliyah School & Mission Centre, also played significant roles in translating religious literature, constructing mosques, and supporting various forms of *dawa*<sup>253</sup>, or Islamic propagation.

The Constitution mandates the separation of State and religion, enshrining the freedom of religious choice and practice, prohibiting religious discrimination, and stipulating that the government shall not interfere in the practice of any religion, nor shall religion interfere in state affairs. It permits limitations on religious freedom as prescribed by law to protect public safety, education, and morality, as well as to ensure the government's independence from religion. The law criminalizes religious defamation and incitement of one religious group against another. Sharia courts are allowed to adjudicate cases related to personal status, provided that both parties are Muslims and consent to the court's jurisdiction.

The registration and licensing of religious groups fall under the purview of the Directorate of Faith and Religious Affairs within the Ministry of Peace. Non-registered religious groups are required to submit founding documents, national identity cards of their founders, and the permanent address of their religious institution and regional branches. The registration process also involves a letter of application, information about the council members, minutes of

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<sup>253</sup> See *glossary*.

meetings, details about founders, financial reports, positions, names, and symbols. Religious group applicants must have at least fifty members to register as a religious entity and fifteen to register as a ministry or association; the rights and privileges are the same for both categories. During the registration process, the government publishes the name and logo of the religious group in a local newspaper; if there are no objections, registration is granted. Registered religious organizations are required to provide annual reports on their activities and finances. Activity reports must describe proselytism activities and list new members, newly ordained clergy, and new places of worship. According to the constitution, the government owns all land; religious groups must apply to both regional and local governments for land allocation, including land for building places of worship.

Unlike other religious groups, the EOTC is not registered with the Ministry of Peace but obtains registration through a provision of the civil code issued during the imperial era and still in effect. Registration with the ministry grants legal status to a religious group, entitling it to assemble and acquire land for constructing places of worship and establishing cemeteries. Unregistered groups do not receive these benefits. Religious groups must renew their registration at least every five years; failure to do so may result in fines <sup>254</sup>.

Government policy prohibits conducting religious services within public institutions, based on the constitutionally mandated separation of religion and state. The government mandates that public institutions take a two-hour break on Fridays to allow workers to participate in Islamic prayers. Private companies are not obligated to follow this policy.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in public and private schools <sup>255</sup>, although both public and private schools may organize clubs based on shared religious values. The law allows for the establishment of a separate category of religious schools under the auspices of churches and mosques. The

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<sup>254</sup> Office of International Religious Freedom. (2019). *International Religious Freedom Report for 2019*. United States Department of State, 3.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibi*, 4.

Charities and Societies Agency, a government entity accountable to the federal attorney general, and the Ministry of Education regulate religious schools, which provide both secular and religious education. The Ministry of Education oversees the secular component of education provided by religious schools.

The law prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion. In March 2019, the government revised a law that restricted the advocacy activities and foreign funding sources of charities and societies, including religious organizations. The new law allows all civil society organizations to engage in advocacy and lobbying activities and to raise and receive funding from any legal source. Religious groups engaged in development activities are required to register their development arms as charities with the Charities and Societies Agency and follow legal guidelines derived from the Charities and Societies Proclamation. In May 2019, the National Bank of Ethiopia (NBE) revised its directive to allow for the establishment of fully-fledged Islamic - interest-free - banks. Seven entrepreneurial groups initiated the process of creating Islamic banks. Previously, 10 commercial banks provided interest-free banking services through dedicated branches. In an emergency session on July 31, the House of Peoples' Representatives approved a new proclamation on banks and customs, providing the legal basis for the NBE to implement its directive and facilitate the establishment of Islamic banking services.

The changing political landscape also created a favourable environment for the emergence and rapid growth of Islamic reform movements in the early 1990s. One of the notable movements during this period was Salafism, referred to as Wahhabism in Ethiopia. While its roots can be traced back to the 1940s in southeastern regions, Salafism experienced significant strengthening and expansion across the country, including regions like Gimma, Wollo, Silte, and Addis Ababa, after 1991.

It's important to distinguish between Salafism and Wahhabism. Salafism, derived from the Arabic *al-salaf al-salih* meaning "the pious ancestors" signifies a return to what is perceived as pure and authentic Islam. This theological trend within Islam emerged during the Abbasid Caliphate. Salafism should not be confused with the 19th-century modernist movement in Egypt known as



Salafiyya, associated with figures like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida. The latter movement evolved into a more politically oriented strand, often referred to as Islamism<sup>256</sup>.

Salafism is not a monolithic phenomenon; it has become increasingly heterogeneous over time, encompassing various actors, groups, and movements. This diversity necessitates caution when attempting to define its meaning. At its core, Salafism is a religious movement dedicated to preserving the purity of Islam. A central concept in Salafism is an unwavering focus on tawhid, the oneness of God. This emphasis results in a detailed theology that prioritizes this oneness while refuting anything deemed as innovation, or *bid'a*, in religious practices.

In Ethiopia, as in other places, Salafism has been particularly concerned with opposing practices such as pilgrimages to local shrines, the veneration of *awliya* or saints, the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, rituals conducted at graveyards, and other traditions believed to have non-Islamic origins. Additionally, in the 1990s, young Salafis advocated for specific behavioural changes, including men shortening their trousers above their ankles growing their beards, and women wearing the niqab to cover their faces. The Salafi message gained traction in Ethiopia, thanks to increased communication with the outside world and the public propagation of Salafi ideas in mosques and schools throughout the country.

In the capital, Addis Ababa, key players in the Salafi movement included the Ethiopian Muslim Youth Association, gradually forming connections with the World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY), the Islamic Dawah & Knowledge Association, and the Awolia College. Additionally, a group of Saudi-educated Oromo ulama (scholars) who settled in Ayer Tena in the early 1990s held significant influence within the Salafi movement, contributing to the development of Salafi ideology in Ethiopia.

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<sup>256</sup> Østebø, T. (2013). "Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia: From Containment to the Production of a 'Governmental Islam'". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, 1037-1041.

The rapid expansion of Salafism, however, led to a more fragmented Muslim community and increased tensions within the Muslim community. Guardians of shrines and traditional leaders expressed concern about the declining number of pilgrims and the gradual disappearance of established practices. While violent clashes were rare, disputes primarily took on a rhetorical nature, with each side accusing the other of deviating from true Islam. Simultaneously, efforts were made to address intra-religious tensions through the Addis Ababa Ulama Unity Forum (AUUF). Established in early 2007, this forum brought together prominent scholars from both Salafi and Sufi backgrounds. They met weekly for nearly two years to discuss contentious religious issues. While not all issues were resolved, these talks emphasized mutual respect and the prevention of conflicts among Muslims.

In the first half of the 1990s, relations between the government and the Muslim community remained relatively smooth, with an increasing institutionalization of the Muslim community. However, a significant shift occurred in 1995-96. Events such as clashes between worshippers and police at the al-Anwar mosque in Addis Ababa in February 1995, a failed assassination attempt against former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in June of the same year, and bombings by the Somali al-Itihad al Islamiyya in major Ethiopian cities from May 1995 to April 1996 heightened the government's concerns about the perceived radicalization of Islam.

The Somalia based Al Ittihad al Islami [...] also had bases in Southeast Ethiopia in the 1990s and carried out armed attacks. There were numerous instances of Christian–Muslim clashes in different regional states as well, including attacks on places of

worship. Religion and ethnicity became intertwined in new local territorial conflicts<sup>257</sup>.

In response, the government took decisive action, including numerous arrests, the closure of organizations, and increased surveillance and control. This intensified after the 9/11 terror attacks, which provided a framework linking global events with regional developments, particularly in Somalia. Ethiopia's former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi had previously expressed concerns about the situation in Somalia. Renewed American attention to the region gave political support and a rationale for cracking down on undesirable movements, both regionally and domestically. Interestingly, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi characterized the Bush-initiated "war on terror" as something "god-sent". The military takeover of Mogadishu by the United Islamic Courts (UIC) in 2006 further fuelled Ethiopia's concerns, as it was seen as potentially transforming Somalia into a safe haven for extremist Islam. Responding to the UIC's *jihad* statement, the Ethiopian army intervened in December 2006 and successfully defeated the UIC militias through a brief but intense campaign. This intervention received broad support from Western powers, emphasizing Ethiopia's vital role in maintaining regional stability and combating international terrorism in the Horn of Africa. The Ethiopian regime leveraged these sentiments, recognizing the potential for obtaining much-needed development aid from the Western world by contributing to the "war on terror."

In addition to its instrumentalist dimension, developments in Somalia in 2006 reignited Ethiopia's historical concerns about external Islamic forces and the possible alignment of such forces with Ethiopia's own Muslim population. Ethiopia responded to these concerns by adopting its antiterror law in 2009, providing the regime with broad powers to counteract any movements labelled as "terrorist" at its discretion. This law marked a significant development in Ethiopia's approach to managing security and extremism within its borders.

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<sup>257</sup> Abbink, J. (2020). Religion and Violence in the Horn of Africa: Trajectories of Mimetic Rivalry and Escalation between 'Political Islam' and the State. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 13.

On June 11th, 2020, the House of People’s Representatives made a momentous decision by passing a bill that formally establishes the EIASC, commonly known as the majlis. This development carries profound positive implications for Ethiopian Muslim society, and it signals a departure from the historical norm where a single religious entity held unparalleled legal status within the Ethiopian state <sup>258</sup>.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’s unique legal standing had its roots in articles 389 and 407 of the 1960 Civil Code, which recognized the church as a legal entity with the ability to establish affiliated organizations without needing annual renewal.

With this recent parliamentary approval, the number of recognized religious entities has expanded to three, including the Ethiopian Gospel Believers and the Ethiopian Evangelical Churches Council. This legislative shift marks a significant transformation in Ethiopia’s religious landscape, transitioning from a predominantly multinational state to a multi-religious one post-1991.

This transition carries immense societal significance. The long-standing principle of the imperial era “the country belongs to all, religion is a personal matter” had remained more aspirational than realized until now. The House’s decision resonates with both older and newer generations, as it signifies a departure from the past and a step toward equality.

However, the significance of this move extends beyond the formal recognition of EIASC and is intrinsically linked to the Ethiopian Muslim community. For Ethiopian Muslims, the majlis had long been seen as a less-than-authentic spiritual representative, and their identification with it was limited. The institution’s shortcomings, characterized by a lack of shared vision and institutional inefficiency, were one aspect of the problem. The more

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<sup>258</sup> Mekonnen, E. *Proclamation finally decrees equality for Ethiopian Muslims*, in <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com>.

damning aspect was its alignment with the state's repressive policies against the Muslim community, supporting measures taken by the EPRDF government.

In the eyes of many Muslims, the majlis appeared to function as an arm of the state's machinery, leading to significant resistance in late 2011. Therefore, the House's action goes beyond mere legal recognition of EIASC; it represents a fundamental issue for the broader Ethiopian Muslim community, touching upon their historical existence, inherent identity, equal standing, and equitable justice in relation to the Ethiopian state.

Two significant historical milestones are particularly relevant to the Ethiopian Muslim community. The first connects with the 20th-century revolution that saw the end of the imperial era and reshaped state-religion relations in Ethiopia. The second signifies a new chapter in state-religion relations and religious equality.

In the mid-1970s, as the revolution gained momentum, Ethiopian Muslims took to the streets, demanding the separation of state and religion. The pre-revolution state-religion relationship had served political and economic interests. The Church had been officially intertwined with the state, and the Emperor's name was required in all religious services. The demand for equal status for their religion and the call to dismantle this historical bond were pivotal, leading to significant demonstrations and reactions from the aristocracy.

Ethiopian Muslims' legitimate rights sought to challenge the exclusivist discourse that had prevailed for centuries. Their demand aimed to disempower this discourse and establish a neutral state that could provide equal status to all religious communities. Ethiopian Muslims played a significant role in the 1974 revolution, contributing to the dethronement of the monarchy and a new chapter that distanced the state from religion during the socialist military junta, the Derg. The struggle for equal status and recognition as an organized religious society continued until late 2011 when Ethiopian Muslims once again mobilized. The landmark peaceful struggle, known as *Dimtsachin Yisema*, began when Ethiopian Muslims uncovered a government plot to interfere with their autonomy and identity.

The EPRDF government's plan to impose a foreign sect, al Ahbash, on Ethiopian Muslims was thwarted by a united and peaceful resistance. This resistance evoked memories of major mass conversion incidents in Ethiopian Muslim history, notably in Wollo and the Ethiopian Somali region. These historical events resonated deeply with Ethiopian Muslims, particularly the younger generation.

Despite the aggressive nature of the state's attempts to impose the foreign sect, Ethiopian Muslims remained unwavering, wise, and strategically organized in their peaceful resistance. Their peaceful struggle garnered widespread support and admiration, serving as a model for challenging the authoritarian state. The resistance played a crucial role in the lead-up to the downfall of the EPRDF.

### 3.2 Contemporary Christian and Muslim Identity in Ethiopia: Factors Influencing Interreligious Coexistence and Future Challenges

Even Bin-Laden and his movement are merely a movement for fighting only, and not a movement for building... Religion teaches us to build and purify ourselves first, and to win over the other and not to kill him... Jihad above all is not only fighting. It is interaction with the other. But they consider it fighting. If he is peaceful with you, then be peaceful with him. If he greets you, then greet him with a better greeting. If he is neutral; not on your side nor against you, God has not given you power over others. If he comes to you with false thought, argue with him. If he comes to kill you, defend yourself, but we are not allowed to initiate aggression against anyone. The religion that is called Islam holds that people's lives remain safe.<sup>259</sup>

The dynamics of interactions between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia are shaped by different but precise factors. These include the exploration of theological themes, the historical dimension, the diverse conversion attitudes and strategies, the recognition of religious courts and places of worship - including all the religious aspects strictly connected -, the acknowledgement of specific areas and ethnic groups as either "Muslim" or "Christian" within the framework of Ethiopia's ethnic-federal system, the contention with the phenomenon of the "acoustic wars", the religious demography, the nature and

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<sup>259</sup> Erlich, H. (2016). *Islam, war, and peace in the Horn of Africa* in Desplat P. & Østebø T. (2016). *Muslim Ethiopia: the Christian legacy identity politics and Islamic reformism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 195.

role of the secular state in Ethiopia, the management of the construction of new churches and mosques and finally fundamentalism challenges and regional crisis.

First of all theological variances prompt investigation into the veracity of religious doctrines, which often manifest as exchanges escalating into endeavours to discredit the faith of the opposing group. Contemporary polemical writings frequently include allegations of tampering with divine scriptures, asserting that the Bible or the Quran does not convey the genuine and accurate word of God or Allah. Such claims, while common in the polemical traditions of monotheistic religions elsewhere, are often unfounded and lack historical basis from a scholarly perspective. Debates center on the theological understanding of Jesus, whether he is regarded as God, the Messiah, or a human being and prophet; discussions delve into the reality and significance of the crucifixion of Jesus. There is an exploration of the nature and unity of God or Allah and the concept of the Trinity, particularly in Christian theology and of the Prophet Mohammed's role as the last prophet in Islam, a critical point of contention. Religion is actively constructed as the normative and dominant identity of citizens by communal leaders and religious entrepreneurs. This construction is linked to religion's distinct social role as a source of community solidarity, spiritual solace, and a legitimate alternative focus for collective identity. However, the competitive construction of identity revolves around the quest for "truth" and religious supremacy in the public sphere, with implications for the broader Ethiopian national identity <sup>260</sup>. This antagonistic religious discourse is redefining public space in Ethiopia, often filling the void left by politics due to the decline of democratic debate and freedoms. The equilibrium

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<sup>260</sup> Abbink, J. (2011). Religion in public spaces: emerging Muslim-Christian polemics in Ethiopia. *African Affairs*, 110(439), 254. «My argument is that, in the past decade or so, religious polemics in Ethiopia have expressed discursive battles about religious 'truths', communal identities, and power claims that take on a global reconnect character and sharpen boundaries between faith communities and thereby between citizens. Such polemics tend to establish antagonistic and hegemonic religious discourses in Ethiopia's public space, marked increasingly by declining democratic-political debate. In doing so, polemics not only fuel tensions but challenge the political domain - that is, the secular state order itself».



between faiths and between faith communities and the state is delicate. Ethiopia's political landscape has undergone significant turmoil in the past decade, marked by contentious elections in 2005, incidents of violence, rural oppression, human rights concerns, and recent enactments of restrictive laws affecting the media, federal powers, NGOs, and counterterrorism measures. Against the backdrop of political and economic insecurity, growing inequality, and a deficit in democratic representation, the appeal to religion as the predominant element of personal and communal identity is poised to persist and present formidable challenges. The period following the opening of political space during the 2005 national election has been aptly described by Erlich in 2016 as a "liberalization intermezzo"<sup>261</sup>. However, subsequent developments have shifted the regime's control over the rural majority of the Ethiopian population toward a more or less totalitarian grasp. This post-2005 era has witnessed the manipulation of political space, constraints on civil society actors, and the expansion of the state apparatus, which provides mechanisms for detailed societal control.

The historical dimension is another significant aspect, with the alleged conversion of Emperor *Negus* Hila Asama to Islam being a prominent issue. The question of whether the Ethiopian emperor converted to Islam nearly fifteen centuries ago, under the influence of the first Muslims at his court, remains a point of contention. While historical records suggest that Prophet Mohammed

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<sup>261</sup> Erlich, H., cit., 247-249. « The opening of political space during the 2005 national election has justly been characterized as a "liberalization intermezzo," and was followed by developments giving the present regime a "more or less a totalitarian control of the rural majority of the Ethiopian population" (Aalen and Tronvoll 2009: 203). By reversing the democratic process and centralizing political power, the post-2005 period has been marked by increased manipulation of the political space, by limiting the operational space for civil society actors, and by expansion of the state apparatus providing mechanisms for detailed control of the society. The imprisonment of the main opposition politicians in 2005 and continued meddling into the oppositional parties by the regime greatly extended EPRDF's power. The "success" of this policy became clear in the 2010 national elections, where the opposition only managed to get one candidate elected into the parliament. In conjunction with this, the post-2005 period also saw massive campaigns to increase the membership of EPRDF, rising from 760,000 in 2005 to 4 million in 2008 (Aalen and Tronvoll 2009: 203)».

advised Arab Muslims to coexist peacefully with Ethiopians, emphasizing the positive role of the Ethiopian emperor in supporting the original Islamic community, some militant Muslims disregard this perspective. Instead, they focus on the notion of a stolen heritage, claiming that Ethiopia should have become an integral part of the Muslim *umma*<sup>262</sup> or community following the emperor's alleged conversion. This historical dispute frequently arises in religious polemics, symposia, public gatherings, and other contentious settings, often sidelining nuanced historical interpretations.

Differences in conversion attitudes and strategies are a source of tension. Salafist-Wahhabi Muslim groups, for instance, prioritize widespread expansion, and conversion through *Dawah*<sup>263</sup>, initially within the Muslim community and then among others<sup>264</sup>. In contrast, EOC, acknowledging their historical dominance, did not actively pursue conversion strategies until more recently. This shift has led to heightened intolerance within the EOC towards perceived “deviant” or lax religious practices among its adherents. Meanwhile, Pentecostal and Evangelical groups consider proselytizing and conversion as central aspects of their mission, rejecting local cultural practices that they view as conflicting

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<sup>262</sup> Ahmed, H. (2001). Islam in nineteenth-century Wollo, Ethiopia: revival, reform and reaction. *Brill, passim*.

<sup>263</sup> See glossary.

<sup>264</sup> Østebø, T. (2008). The Question of Becoming: Islamic Reform Movements in Contemporary Ethiopia. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 38(4), 420. « Although Harar admittedly was important as a bridgehead for the introduction of Salafi Islam, centres for Salafi teaching also emerged in the vicinity of the town. Important for this development was the expansion of khat as a cash crop in Hararge, which led to an increase of the hajj among the Oromo, who then returned to disseminate the new teaching among their kinsmen.<sup>8</sup> Later, in the 1960s and early 1970s, an increasing number of Oromo returning from religious studies in Saudi Arabia played a pivotal role in further expanding Salafism in Bale and Arsi. Similar developments were seen in Addis Ababa and in areas such as Wollo, although to a lesser degree. This means that Salafism in Ethiopia from the beginning had the form of a home-grown movement, in the sense that the new ideas were introduced by Ethiopians, and not by foreign missionaries. The doctrinal links to Saudi Arabia were obvious, as, to some degree, were the financial. Yet the important role played by locals had a clear impact on the way the Salafi doctrines were introduced to and remoulded within the respective localities ».

with their devotion to God. Concerning politics, the purist trend is prominent among Ethiopian Salafis. While most Salafis would welcome an expanded role for *sharia* courts, including the possibility of corporal punishments, they generally view incorporating *sharia* into the governing system as impractical in Ethiopia. They emphasize the importance of religious freedom for all under a secular government. The Tabligh movement, in contrast, avoids direct involvement in politics and focuses on the Islamization of society through individual efforts to lead others to Islam<sup>265</sup>. The Intellectualist movement has a more elaborate stance on politics. It advocates for equal representation of Muslims in public life and envisions a political environment that promotes mutual respect and coexistence between religions. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood's view of Islam infused into politics, the Intellectualists argue that religious freedom can only be guaranteed under a secular government. These movements' positions on politics and their interactions with Christians highlight the impact of local context on the reception and adaptation of translocal currents of thought. The Ethiopian government's increasing authoritarianism has curtailed political and societal activities, including those within the Muslim community. ELASC has emerged as the primary actor, closely aligned with the regime and effectively monitoring and controlling developments among Muslims.

The growth of Salafism was to a large extent checked by the Derg. Guided by its Marxist ideology, the regime sought to curb religious activities in general, yet it never succeeded in eradicating the movement. One important aspect for its survival was the movement's decentralised character. There was no structured organisation which the regime could interfere in or ban. Everything was on an informal basis, with the mosque as the main arena for the dissemination and teaching of the Salafi

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<sup>265</sup> However, in some areas, Tabligh networks have been influenced by more politicized groups.

message. Whereas reforms were to be temporarily postponed during the Derg, this was to change dramatically from 1991.<sup>266</sup>

The regime's actions have reduced the space for alternative organizations, leading to the informal and deinstitutionalized nature of contemporary Ethiopian Islam. Despite these limitations, mosques have retained significance as "closed spaces", fostering the emergence of independent figures who promote diverse ideas, contributing to a "fragmented" landscape. The country's history of religious plurality and peaceful coexistence has prevented the escalation of inter-religious conflicts<sup>267</sup>. Interactions at the grassroots level, mutual respect, and even interfaith marriages and conversions have played a role in maintaining harmony.

Additional controversies revolve around the recognition of religious courts, holidays, places of worship, and prayer times, particularly in public spaces within Ethiopia's secular state framework. Despite official recognition and celebration of Muslim practices and worship locations since 1974, internal debates continue, reflecting Muslims' perception of their disadvantaged status in society. Similar sentiments have been voiced within Christian circles as well. Another aspect of the regime's strategy involves supporting so-called traditional "Islamic sites"<sup>268</sup>, with the shrine of Shaykh Husayn in Bale serving as a prominent example. This shrine, located in southern Ethiopia, has become a focal point for the regime's development initiatives, including the construction of roads, provision of utilities, and facilitation of transportation services for pilgrims. The shrine's custodians now view the government as a crucial ally in their efforts against certain forms of extremism<sup>269</sup>.

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<sup>266</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>267</sup> Østebø, T., cit., 430-435.

<sup>268</sup> Efforts have also been made to have the shrine included on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

<sup>269</sup> Østebø, T. (2013). "Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia: From Containment to the Production of a 'Governmental Islam'". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, 1037-1044.

Current developments within Islam in Ethiopia have been widely interpreted by both Ethiopian and foreign observers as a process marked by increasing politicization and radicalization<sup>270</sup>. This phenomenon is often labelled as “Islamic fundamentalism”. In considering the role and identity of Ethiopian Muslims within the current era of decentralized national identities and redefined modernity, Islamic fundamentalism, as an expression of it, is largely confined to Sudan, where the National Islamic Front government<sup>271</sup> holds sway. Other movements with analogous characteristics can be found in Algeria, Egypt, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia, Senegal, and a few other countries. However, in Ethiopia, such a movement remains isolated and is unlikely to garner widespread adherence.

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«pace. The shrine also received a grant for US\$25,600 from the U.S. embassy in Addis Ababa in 2005, given for the restoration of the shrine (United States Embassy in Addis Ababa 2005). The U.S. policy toward Islam in the region dovetailed nicely with the Ethiopian regime’s perceptions, as the Americans viewed Salafism as “foreign” and Saudi-funded “cultural imperialism” as attempting to subvert “moderate Sufi Ethiopian Islam.” U.S. policy has consequently been aimed at countering this by “cultural programming” focused on places, objects, and traditions related to “indigenous Muslim communities,” and has, through the U.S. embassy in Addis Ababa, deliberately targeted Muslims in its development schemes and provided support to predominantly Muslim areas».

<sup>270</sup> *Ibi*, 430-435.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibi*, 1043. « Regionally, this has been played out through the Ethiopian government’s active support for certain “moderate” religious elements in Somalia. Besides backing the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), the regime played a significant role in brokering a deal between the TFG and the Ahl al-Sunna wal Jama’a (ASWJ) early in 2010. In addition to viewing the ASWJ as important in the struggle against the militant al-Shabab, its ideological features clearly fitted with the regime’s binary perception of Islam, in which the group is seen as the representative of a “home-grown” Islam: Sufi, tolerant, inclusive, and peaceful. An interesting detail is that an Ethiopian version of ASWJ was created in the Oromia National Regional State in June 2012. Very little is known about this organization, except that it is said to be fighting “extremism” and seeks to “form a pure Islam by standing alongside [the] government».

In the case of Islam, Ethiopia provides a case of state-religious community relations that is in many ways the reverse of Somalia: no state religion, a balance of religious communities, with Islam not as a majority but as a large minority (34%), and strong state surveillance and state pre-eminence over organized religion (also on Orthodox Christianity). In recent decades Ethiopia has not been marked by escalating Christian or Islamist-inspired terrorist violence, except a few series of burnings of (Sufi) mosques and churches and incidents of seemingly targeted 'religious' killings. The presence of small radical-militant Muslim groups and Takfiris (radicals 'excommunicating' and declaring other Muslims as 'enemy') was reported in the late 1990s but these were suppressed, and remnants are monitored.<sup>272</sup>

Hence, it is posited that the social and cultural conditions conducive to the emergence of political Islam in a fundamentalist or Islamist form are unfavourable within the Ethiopian context. The pre-eminence of ethnicity, socio-economic considerations, and the distinctive nature of the Ethiopian state, particularly in its current federalized configuration, are likely to intersect with any homogenizing tendencies associated with a collective Islamic identity. These developments are evident in the proliferation of mosques across the country and the rising number of Muslims holding positions in government and public life. Some assert that Ethiopian Muslims aspire to attain political power based on radical religious ideologies. In the public discourse, strong statements have been made, portraying Quranic schools as centers for what some perceive as "brainwashing" and breeding grounds for potential extremists. There have been allegations that Ethiopian children are sent to various Middle Eastern countries for military training, only to return and participate in coordinated jihadist

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<sup>272</sup> Abbink, J. (2020). Religion and Violence in the Horn of Africa: Trajectories of Mimetic Rivalry and Escalation between 'Political Islam' and the State. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 12.

activities. The impact of these developments within the Islamic community has spilled over into Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia.

The growing presence of Muslims in public offices and the mushrooming of mosques all over the country were repeatedly forwarded as evidence for the claim that Ethiopian Muslims were aspiring for political power based on radical religious ideas. The public debate became more polemical and hostile. It was even claimed that Islamic schools were “brain washing sessions and jihad factories nurturing potential bin Ladens,” and that “innocent Ethiopian kids are taken to various countries in the Middle East for military training, and then return home to participate in the meticulously planned and widely coordinated jihad” (Alem Zele-Alem 2003). Many such sentiments are said to be spear headed by the Mahibere Qidusan (the association of saints) [...].<sup>273</sup>

Previously celebrated as peaceful and tolerant, these relations have faced challenges, particularly during the 1990s. Tensions between Christians and Muslims often revolve around the construction of mosques and churches and the public celebration of religious holidays. Disputes over the allocation of land for religious purposes have led to protests and occasional clashes between the two communities. Drawing parallels with the “Ahmed Gragh Syndrome”<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Østebø, T., cit., 1041.

<sup>274</sup> Erlich, H., cit., 196. «On the Ethiopian side, the “Ahmad Gragh syndrome”-fear of a Somali-led Islamic holy war seemed to be much behind the decision to invade Mogadishu in December 2006. For many in the greater Islamic world and the Somali side, the invasion inspired a momentous conceptual demonization of Ethiopia as the ultimate historical enemy of Islam. For the purpose of this demonization, the initial meeting point between Islam and Christianity was

where Islam is seen as an external threat that could potentially align with Ethiopia's Muslim population, the regime has introduced a new dichotomy within the country's Muslim community, distinguishing between "extremist" and "moderate" segments. In practice, this involves restricting the activities of the former while actively supporting the latter. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has repeatedly used this term to describe a locally grown, traditional form of Ethiopian Islam. It is characterized as pragmatic, flexible, and apolitical, and it is perceived as currently under threat from foreign and intolerant Salafis. This dichotomy bears some resemblance<sup>275</sup> to the colonial differentiation between "Arab Islam" and "African Islam". Efforts to promote and dichotomize Islam have been notably reflected in the EIASC while similar relationships between Islamic councils and political regimes have been observed in other East African regions: the Ethiopian case shows more direct involvement by the authorities, particularly after 1995. For instance, during the election of a new council in January 2004, a representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs attended the voting session. The joint efforts of the regime and the council have primarily aimed to cleanse the council of Salafis and to guard against general "extremist" influence within Ethiopia. It remains unclear whether these efforts align with the council's own preferences or result from co-optation by the regime. Nevertheless, the regime has exerted considerable pressure on the council, and the council's affiliation with the regime has led to the perception among the wider Muslim population that council members are influenced or controlled by the ruling party. The council's extensive infrastructure and close ties to the

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reconsidered and changed by the radicals from the harmonious story of the prophet and the al-Najashi to a different episode. According to Islamic tradition, Abraha al-Ashram, an Ethiopian ruler of pre-Islamic Yemen, tried, in the year 570 A.D., to demolish the Kaaba shrine in Mecca and divert the local Arabs to a church he had built in Sana'a. The episode, alluded to in the Quran, was eternalized in the tradition that an Ethiopian would eventually destroy the Kaaba, which, because of its extremely negative message, had hitherto rarely been mentioned. But today, for the radicals in the greater Islamic world and in Somalia, Ethiopia's leader Meles Zenawi is widely depicted as Abraha, the would-be Ethiopian destroyer of Islamic holiness. The Islamic militants' publications and websites since early 2007 have been replete with such sentences as: "God, do defeat the aggressors like you destroyed...Abraha, like you destroyed Pharaoh».

<sup>275</sup> Østebø, T., cit., 1042.



regime have enabled the government to effectively monitor and control developments within the Muslim community. At a regional level, this has manifested through the Ethiopian government's active support for certain "moderate" religious elements in Somalia. Nevertheless, Islamic revivalism, coupled with the pursuit and preservation of full equal rights for Muslims as citizens in a post-ideological, "ethicized" Ethiopia, are anticipated to persist. This trend mirrors renewal movements observed within the Orthodox Christian Church and, notably, Pentecostal movements in Ethiopia. Whether this quest will eventually manifest in a political form remains uncertain. The global narrative of Islam will play a significant role in further delineating the self-image and socio-political role of Muslims in Ethiopia. Consequently, the ongoing process of Islamic revival in Ethiopia, as evidenced by new written media, self-organization, and proselytization efforts, along with the expressions of Islamic identities among diverse major ethnic groups in the country, presents a rich and timely area warranting scholarly investigation, as in the case of the al-Ahbash movement<sup>276</sup>.

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<sup>276</sup> In Ethiopia, Al-Ahbash refers to a Sunni Muslim religious movement and organization that follows the teachings and principles of the broader Al-Ahbash movement. While the Al-Ahbash movement itself has its roots in Lebanon, it has gained a presence in various countries, including Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, Al-Ahbash is known for its moderate and apolitical approach to Islam. It emphasizes a more open and tolerant interpretation of the religion and engages in educational and charitable activities. Al-Ahbash followers in Ethiopia are often involved in community-building efforts, religious education, and social welfare initiative.

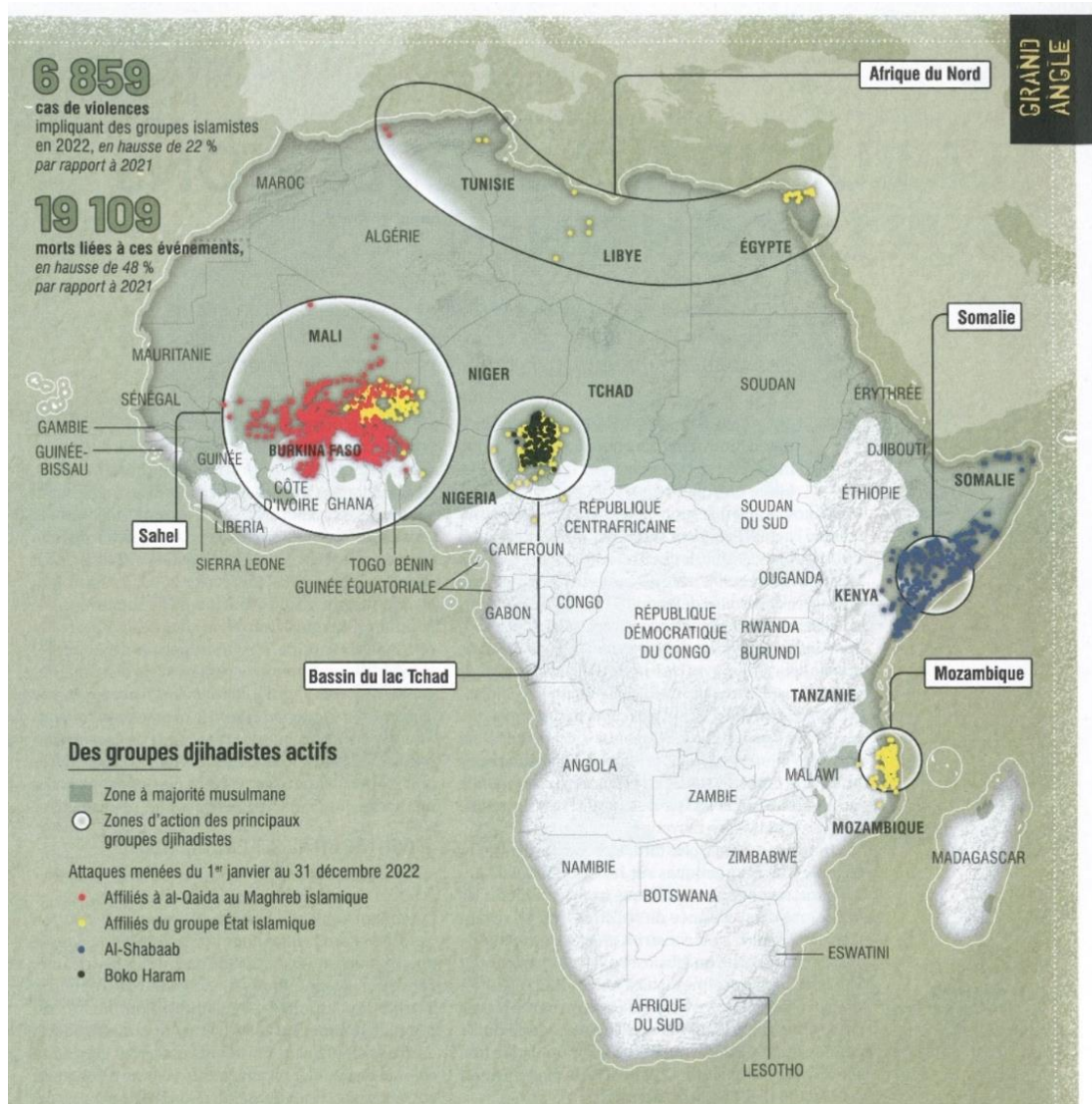


Figure 3.1 – Risk map 2023 : des groupes djihadistes actifs

One of al-Ahbash’s key <sup>277</sup> missions is to counter what it views as “extremist” forms of Islam, particularly singling out Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood as dangerous forces. It opposes the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and Sayid Qutb, considering them proponents of intolerance and fanaticism. Al-Ahbash staunchly rejects violence against ruling authorities and disavows the concept of an Islamic state, positioning itself

<sup>277</sup> Kabha, M. and Erlich, H. (2006). Al-Ahbash and Wahhabiyya: interpretations of Islam. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, 4, 519-38.

as a champion of moderation. It advocates religious diversity, political stability, and a passive political role. Moreover, al-Ahbash promotes engagement with Western knowledge and science to “civilize” Islamic society. Interestingly, the name “al-Ahbash”<sup>278</sup> has an Ethiopian connection, although it primarily refers to the people of Ethiopia, embodied in Shaikh Abdallah ibn Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Harari, a religious scholar from Ethiopia’s Harar city who became the long-term spiritual leader of al-Ahbash. Some attribute the development of al-Ahbash’s core ideology to personal conflicts between Shaikh Abdallah and a local proponent of Salafism in Harar during the 1930s and 1940s. The crucial shift in Ethiopia’s Islamic landscape occurred in 2011 when al-Ahbash representatives, led by Dr. Samir Qadi, were invited to a conference organized by EIASC) the Ministry of Federal Affairs in Harar. This conference, lasting for two weeks and attended by 1,300 participants, focused on countering “religious extremism” in Ethiopia. Key government officials, including the Minister of Federal Affairs, Shiferew Tekle-Mariam, played significant roles in these events, signalling the government’s involvement in introducing al-Ahbash’s ideas to the Ethiopian Muslim population<sup>279</sup>. As part of this campaign, al-Ahbash conducted training sessions at various university campuses, involving over eighteen thousand participants, including religious scholars and students. Government officials consistently portrayed Salafis as extremists and terrorists and emphasized the importance of supporting traditional Islamic knowledge to counter terrorism. They underscored the need for Muslims to be loyal to the

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<sup>278</sup> Østebø, T., cit., 1045. «Al-Ahbash's official name is the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP), or the Jami'at al-Mashari' al-Khayriya al-Islamiya, head quartered in Beirut. Originally fairly anonymous, al-Ahbas increasingly involved in Lebanese politics during the 1980s, entering the parliament in 1989. Rather than basing its involvement on religious preferences, in the sense of seeking to Islamize politics, the organization promulgated itself as being part of a “public service” within the Lebanese political framework, emphasizing the need to uphold political stability, to promote social and religious pluralism, and to serve Lebanon's national interests (Hamzeh and Dekmejian 1996: 224). Moreover, from the 1980s, it emerged as a transnational Islamic organization with offices in the Middle East, south-east Asia, Europe, North America, and Australia, where it currently runs extensive networks of kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, and several colleges».

<sup>279</sup> Østebø, T., cit., 1044-1052.

political authorities and maintain religious harmony, using Ethiopia's history of interreligious coexistence as a basis. These developments should be viewed in the context of the Ethiopian government's efforts to maintain political stability and prioritize economic growth. The regime sought to suppress any potential threats, including religious extremism, to its hold on power. The events surrounding Awolia College, which saw a transfer of ownership to EIASC and subsequent tensions related to curriculum changes, also contributed to the overall narrative of religious upheaval in Ethiopia. In summary, the events of 2011 marked a significant turning point in Ethiopia's religious landscape, with the Ethiopian government's involvement in shaping the direction of Islam and the rising influence of al-Ahbash. These developments were driven by concerns about religious extremism and political stability in the country. Ethiopia subsequently assumed the role of a regional superpower, positioning itself as a bulwark against the perceived threat of Islamist extremism. While Ethiopia had been involved in Somali affairs to some extent, the situation underwent a dramatic shift with its military intervention in December 2006. Fearing the potential of Somalia becoming a safe haven for what they viewed as extremist Islam, and in response to the "jihad statement" by the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), the Ethiopian military conducted a swift and intensive campaign that defeated the relatively weak but overconfident ICU militias. However, Ethiopia's intervention inadvertently created more space for groups like al-Shabaab, exacerbating instability and religiously motivated insurgency. Although Ethiopia withdrew from the conflict in January 2009 with the arrival of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISON) forces, it has remained deeply engaged in Somali affairs. This involvement is manifested through its membership in the IGAD, its support for the TFG, and its continued efforts to address regional security challenges<sup>280</sup>.

In the post-1991 era, disputes have arisen over the recognition of areas and ethnic groups as "Muslim" or "Christian" within Ethiopia's ethnic-federal system, leading to financial and political ramifications. The case of the Silt'e

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<sup>280</sup> Desplat, P. & Østebø, T. (2016). *Muslim Ethiopia: the Christian legacy identity politics and Islamic reformism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 249.

Gurage<sup>281</sup>, a Muslim group that officially separated from the larger Gurage-speaking community, illustrates the impact of such recognition on religious dynamics. These developments have contributed to the resurgence of stricter, revivalist forms of Islam in certain regions. On 18th July 2019, groups of individuals from the Sidama ethnic group, advocating for regional statehood, launched an attack on a church in the Sidama zone of the SNNP region. Officials from the Ministry of Peace confirmed the attack on religious institutions but did not provide specific details. Media outlets affiliated with the EOTC reported that the crowd killed a priest and two church followers, burned three churches, and partially damaged four others. Local researchers investigating these claims were unable to ascertain the motivation behind the attack. Organized groups of youth also vandalized the Church of St. Emmanuel in Chironie, as reported by local press. The high priest of the Church of St. Mary in Bore Debre Genet, in the neighbouring Oromia region, stated to the media that his church sheltered 474 internally displaced persons, including deacons and priests, whose churches were burned during the conflict. In Dire Dawa, on January 21st, an unidentified group of young individuals threw stones at EOTC followers returning from Epiphany celebrations. Orthodox youths responded by physically attacking the unidentified youth. Police intervened, using tear gas and arresting some participants in the incident. This clash was followed by disturbances that escalated into broader political protests the following week. On January 24th, the Police Commission announced the arrest of 84 individuals suspected of

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<sup>281</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 269. «In the post- 1991 era, much contestation emerged on the recognition of areas and ethnic groups in Ethiopia (within the ethnic-federal system) as 'Muslim' or 'Christian', with resultant financial and political rewards. A recent case in point is the Silt'e Gurage, a Muslim group officially split off from the larger Gurage-speaking people, now with their own political administrative unit ('zone'). This in turn led to a growing influence of a stricter, revivalist Islam in this zone. An issue related to this is the debate on the nature and role of the state in general: in Ethiopia a secular state recognizing the right to choose one's religion and keeping proper distance between state and religious life is constitutionally established, but continued 'ethnic'-territorial disputes and controversy over the range of religious law have maintained constant pressure on this model. In this political context, the debate on the status or extension of shari'a law in Ethiopia resisted by the state, the Christians, and the more secular-minded - also continues».

participating in the clashes on January 21st. On February 3rd, young members of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church in Mekane Yesus, in the Amhara region, burned mosques and vandalized Muslim-owned businesses. According to local government officials and religious leaders, Christians found an icon of Saint Mary scattered among pieces of paper used to decorate the floor of a tent built for an Islamic wedding. The youth, angered by this perceived desecration, set fire to two mosques, partially damaged a third, and vandalized shops owned by members of the Muslim community. Regional special police forces were deployed to the area to assist local police in quelling the unrest. Local media did not report any casualties associated with the incident. Both federal and regional governments sent officials to the town to facilitate public discussions between Muslims and Christians. According to local officials, in February, a group of Muslims attacked and burned seven Protestant churches in Halaba Kulito, in the SNNP region. Regional officials stated that the attacks were incited by false news that mosques had been attacked by non-Muslims in the area. According to a report, the suspects chanted a jihadist slogan while attacking places of worship belonging to different Christian denominations. The municipal police were reportedly present but did not intervene, and order was only restored upon the arrival of state police in the early afternoon. In May 2019, reports emerged of armed groups attacking Orthodox churches in the North Scioa region of the Oromia region. The Addis Ababa diocese of the EOTC reported that security forces arrested 55 followers on September 27th during processions on the eve of Meskel, a religious holiday. The police stated that 33 of the detainees wore shirts with messages calling for an end to attacks on the Church, and 12 of them carried sharp objects. The police released 37 detainees a few hours after the conclusion of the celebrations. In October, there were reports of clashes during protests in the Oromia region. While the fighting was primarily along ethnic lines, the regional police commissioner stated that there were attempts to burn churches and mosques, and “there was a hidden agenda to turn the entire protest into an ethnic and religious conflict.” According to the mayor of Adama city in the Oromia region, 68 people were arrested on charges of looting and attempting to burn a mosque and an Orthodox church. In Dodala, an Orthodox priest claimed that Orthodox Christians were targeted. Within a week, eight people

were killed and buried in his church while 3,000 took refuge within his compound. Throughout the year, there were fewer reports of government enforcement or dissemination of Al-Ahbash teachings, a Sufi religious movement rooted in Lebanon and distinct from indigenous Islam. In 2018, the Directorate for the Registration of Religious Groups at the Ministry of Peace reported that by year-end, 816 religious institutions and 1,640 religious fraternities and associations had been registered. On May 1st, Prime Minister Abiy convened leaders of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (IASC) and the Muslim Arbitration Committee, a rival group, in an attempt to resolve disputes within the Muslim community. Prime Minister Abiy's engagement prompted representatives of the Muslim community to agree during the May 1st meeting to replace the IASC (also known as the *Majlis*) with a transitional council of *Ulama* or Muslim scholars. The Prime Minister, accompanied by Minister of Peace Muferiat Kamil, addressed the meeting of Muslim leaders on May 1st and stated, "A united Muslim community is the foundation of national unity." The goal of the 23-member transitional council is to prepare the legal and institutional framework for a new leadership structure for the Muslim community. Majlis leaders formally relinquished power to the transitional council. A group of local youth and police in the town of Bishoftu in the Oromia region stopped Sunday school youth from the Debremetsehet Kidanemihret EOTC church during Meskel festival processions on September 27th, alleging that EOTC followers were wearing clothing depicting an unauthorized version of the Ethiopian flag. The unauthorized version of the flag is closely associated with the country's Amhara ethnic population and the EOTC. Sunday School youths refused to change their uniforms and returned to the church premises. Reports indicated that participants from other EOTC churches had heard about the controversy and decided not to light a demera (large bonfire) in the absence of their fellow church members<sup>282</sup>. In the present era, prominent positions within national politics and the business sector are predominantly occupied by individuals hailing from the northern Tigray region and loyalists from various

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<sup>282</sup> Office of International Religious Freedom. (2019). *International Religious Freedom Report for 2019*. United States Department of State, *passim*.

ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, religious institutions, encompassing both Christian and Muslim faiths, have largely aligned themselves with the objectives of the incumbent regime. The contemporary political discourse in Ethiopia has undergone a significant transformation since the downfall of the Ethio-Communist regime under Mengistu's leadership. This transformation has reframed all national-level conflicts and societal issues through the prism of ethnicity. Ethnic identity has now assumed paramount importance in the realms of political discourse, economic and educational policies, as well as regional and local governance, as analyzed by Abbink in 1998:

The political discourse in present-day Ethiopia, after the demise of the Ethio-Communist Mengistu-regime with its meta-narrative of state-socialism, areligiosity and the unitary state, has dissolved all conflicts and social issues of nation-wide importance into ethnicity. Ethnic identity is - rightly or wrongly - seen and defined by the Ethiopian regime as the determinant of political debate, of economic and educational policy, and of regional and local administration. It is held to be the 'vessel' or prism through which people's democratic rights are realized. Religious identification has also been drawn into this: one is not Muslim or Christian but one is Oromo or Afar Muslim and Amhara or Gurage Christian.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Abbink, J. (1998). An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11, 121-123. «It is ironic that at present the largest private Investor in Ethiopia today is a Muslim business tycoon, Mohammed al-Amudi (from an Ethiopian-Saudi family), the wealthiest man in the region, with an extending global network of interests. He does not style himself as a Muslim revivalist but primarily as an Ethiopian of Muslim faith committed to national development and business. He has funded Muslim educational programmes and the building of many mosques in Ethiopia, but his charitable trust also supports Christian and non-denominational social or educational projects».



It is regarded as the primary determinant through which individuals exercise their democratic rights. Within this framework, religious identity has also been subsumed, and people are no longer simply categorized as Muslim or Christian but are delineated as, for instance, Oromo or Afar Muslims, or Amhara or Gurage Christians. Consequently, a contest for allegiance between religious affiliation and ethnicity has begun to unfold. Curiously, the matter of national integration or cohesion is scarcely addressed in Ethiopia. Each ethnic and religious community has been endowed with the right and responsibility to manage its own affairs within the framework of a federal government that portrays the semblance of unity. Models and ideals aimed at seeking common ground and fostering trans-regional, trans-ethnic, and trans-religious cooperation have been downplayed due to historical challenges related to diversity, suppression, and social inequality. This societal model is intriguing in that it embodies a radical recognition of diversity and a novel form of equality. Nonetheless, it also opens the door to potential destabilizing dynamics linked to parochial identity formation and sectarian counter-discourses along ethnic and religious lines. Nevertheless, since 1991, Ethiopian Muslims have gained greater rights and influence in comparison to earlier periods. They have approached near-parity with Christians, although not in terms of sheer numbers. Moreover, they are no longer hesitant to assert their rightful position within Ethiopian society. A significant manifestation of this shift was the large-scale public demonstration by tens of thousands of Muslims in the capital on November 28, 1994, during which they articulated the demands of the Muslim community to the government. While foreign funding played a role, Salafism in Ethiopia relied heavily on local resources. Many mosques, schools, and dawa efforts were financed locally. The influence of foreign funding waned following the events of September 11th, as the Ethiopian government, in line with the American “War on Terror” restricted the activities and investments of Saudi Arabian organizations in Ethiopia. Despite internal conflicts and schisms, it is essential to note that these controversies did not signify a departure from the purist trend. Both older and younger Salafis in Ethiopia remained committed to pursuing

religious reforms through peaceful means, with less focus on political issues <sup>284</sup>. The current regime's constitutional recognition of Ethiopia's ethnic diversity has triggered a heated and highly politicized debate on ethnicity that dominated public discourse throughout the 1990s. Ethnicity has affected both the unity within the Muslim population and the existing ideological differences among Islamic movements. Religious affiliation in Ethiopia often overlaps with membership in a particular ethnic group. While Muslims are primarily defined by their religious affiliation, there are cases <sup>285</sup> where Muslim groups define themselves through ethnic categories or view religion and ethnicity as synonymous. The three reform movements in Ethiopia - Tabligh, Intellectualist, and Salafi - have been influenced by this relationship between religion and ethnicity. Tabligh's close ties to the Gurage community have confined the movement within a particular ethnic group. The Gurage, as a migrant community in Addis Ababa, have sought to demarcate boundaries between themselves and other Muslim groups, especially those from Wollo and Harari. Tabligh has served as an identity marker for the Gurage within the larger Muslim community. In contrast, the Intellectualist movement is not confined to a particular ethnic group but attracts followers from various ethnic backgrounds. However, the leadership and a majority of followers come from Amharic-speaking areas in northern Ethiopia. The Intellectualists advocate Muslim unity regardless of ethnic affiliation and criticize the current federal structure that recognizes Ethiopia's ethnic diversity, aligning with the view of a centralized Ethiopia held by the Amhara population. The Salafi movement has found strong support among the Oromo population, particularly in areas like Hararge, Bale, and Arsi. The movement's adherents are mainly from the Oromo ethnic group. The Oromo Salafis' support for the OLF, an ethno-nationalist group, reflects the

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<sup>284</sup> Østebø, T. (2008). The Question of Becoming: Islamic Reform Movements in Contemporary Ethiopia. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 38(4), 421-422.

<sup>285</sup> For example, some Somalis equate Somalis with being Muslim, and the Muslim Oromo of Bale historically referred to themselves as "Islaama" signifying both their religious affiliation and ethnic identity. The relationship between ethnicity and religion can be complex, with each informing the other and contributing to the creation of overlapping ethnic and intra-religious boundaries.

politicalization of ethnicity among the Oromo. While faith remains an individual matter, Oromumma, or Oromo ethnic identity, is a collective identity marker, with many young Salafis still prioritizing their Oromo identity over their Muslim identity. This relationship between religion and ethnicity is complex, and ethnicity often takes precedence. Membership in a reform movement and belonging to a specific ethnic group reinforce each other as part of an identity-building process. This interaction is particularly evident among Oromo Salafis, who emphasize the primordial nature of their Oromo identity alongside their adherence to Salafi doctrines. This intrinsic link between religion and ethnicity has contributed to the antagonism between different reform movements, leading to the use of derogatory labels based on both religious and ethnic criteria. The complex relationship between religion and ethnicity also has implications for the Muslim community's stance on political issues. For example, the Muslim community's response to a potential conflict could be divided along ethnic lines, with northern Muslims more supportive of the regime and southern Muslims, especially the Oromo and Somali, more opposed to it. This division highlights the challenge of transcending ethnic boundaries within the Muslim community. While ethnicity remains a potent marker of identification in Ethiopia, the growing attention to religious affiliation and boundaries has created a contradictory situation. Religion and ethnicity are intertwined, and their relative strengths continue to evolve.

Additionally, debates persist regarding the nature and role of the secular state in Ethiopia, which constitutionally recognizes the right to choose one's religion and maintains a separation between state and religious affairs. However, ongoing disputes related to ethnic and territorial issues, as well as disagreements over the scope of religious law, continually challenge this model.

As we witness the early stages of dissatisfaction with the status quo in Ethiopia, the country faces three alternative choices. The first is to proceed with the EPRDF's design of ethnic federalism, arguing that without it Ethiopia would collapse into an ethnic centrifuge (Habtu 2003, 2011; Smith 2007). The second choice is

to let the constitutional provisions of ethnic federalism proceed to their logical conclusion and allow ethnic *killils* to secede if they so wish (Melbaa 1999). The third choice is to scrap ethnic federation and build a secular federal state with individual national citizenship but no ethnic group covenants (Mehretu 2012). Ethnic federalism, the way it is currently designed, is unsustainable. The secession provision is unrealistic to begin with and a push to achieve it by any *killil* would produce uncertain futures. Progressives of all ethno-linguistic groups in Ethiopia must come together to work on less anachronistic ideas around the third choice.<sup>286</sup>

The debate concerning the status and expansion of *sharia* law in Ethiopia, which faces resistance from the state, Christian groups, and more secular-minded individuals, remains unresolved. The EPRDF regime has taken a more proactive stance regarding religion. It actively participates in intra-religious debates and has endeavoured to shape its own interpretation of Ethiopian Islam. The regime's overarching goal is to establish clear definitions of what forms of Islam are acceptable. This approach is rooted in historical negative attitudes toward Islam and is driven by the regime's specific political objectives. In light of the ongoing contestation surrounding the secular state order in Ethiopia, which currently operates without a state religion, acknowledges religious pluralism, refrains from justifying political decisions with reference to God or supernatural forces, and constitutionally recognizes religious courts in many aspects of personal life, the encroachment of religious discourse into the public sphere is increasingly viewed as a growing concern. Additionally, external forces from neighbouring countries, the Middle East, and globally active groups wield significant financial and ideological influence on the local scene, presenting a considerable political challenge. As efforts to proselytize and impose religion on others continue to incite controversy and communal tensions, it may become

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<sup>286</sup> Mehretu, A. (2017). Delegitimization of the Collective Identity of Ethiopianism. *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 11(1 & 2), 65.

necessary for the secular state to assert itself and counter the erosion of its influence by religious discourse through the implementation of new political measures, educational initiatives, and structural social policies. Ethiopia has, thus far, displayed a relatively effective ability to monitor religious threats in the public sphere, including instances of terrorism, compared to other African nations. However, experiences have shown that state efforts in this regard can be inconsistent. In the absence of a consistent state response to expansive religious claims, one might anticipate the emergence of new phases of civil unrest and conflict in the country, potentially surpassing the intensity of past “ethnic” clashes.

A relatively recent phenomenon in this landscape is the emergence of “acoustic wars”<sup>287</sup>. This involves a discourse conveyed through extensive religious noise production, as microphones affixed to churches, mosques, and chapels broadcast sermons, religious services, calls to prayer, and religious songs. This auditory saturation encroaches upon public space and has generated concerns, including disturbances to the peace and early morning awakenings.

Underlying much of this religious struggle is the issue of religious demography. Disputes regarding the number of Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia have persisted, even when based on data from the Central Statistical Agency (CSA). Public suspicion regarding the accuracy of CSA data arose following delays in the release of preliminary data reports in the 1994 and 2007 censuses, leading to perceptions of data manipulation. The most recent census report showed a decline in the number of Ethiopian Orthodox adherents and an increase in the Muslim population, prompting protests from both religious groups. This rivalry over population figures raises concerns about meaningful public discourse and population policy in Ethiopia, as well as the importance attached to the numerical strength of faith communities in a constitutionally secular state<sup>288</sup>.

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<sup>287</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 269.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibidem*.

Furthermore, the polemical approach is evident in concrete disputes, such as the construction of new churches and mosques <sup>289</sup>. The number of such religious structures has significantly increased since 1991, particularly in the case of mosques, leading to debates <sup>290</sup> and resistance regarding their locations. Notably, the proposed construction of a mosque in the historically symbolic city of Aksum faced rejection due to its role as the EOC capital, associated with the Ark of the Covenant or *Tabot*, and the steadfast refusal of EOC clergy to alter Aksum's status. Similar sentiments were expressed in the ancient Christian town of Lalibela. In contrast, few restrictions on mosque construction were imposed in Addis Ababa. Additionally, disputes arise concerning the recognition and construction of historical monuments, frequently linked to debates over the veneration of historical sites. An illustrative case is the proposed monument in the regional state of Amhara, commemorating Ahmed ibn Ibrahim Gagn, whom authorities described as a historical figure. Although the government authorized the monument's construction in the late 1990s, it faced vehement opposition from local residents and many Christians across the country due to Ahmed's destructive legacy. The monument, under construction, was twice

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<sup>289</sup> Østebø, T. (2008). The Question of Becoming: Islamic Reform Movements in Contemporary Ethiopia. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 38(4), 420. «[...] to other parts of the country, such as Harar, Jimma, Wollo and Addis Ababa. The EPRDF's policy on religion was crucial for this development, as it produced an environment conducive to a public propagation of the Salafi message, as well as enabling the Ethiopian Salafis to strengthen their contacts with the outside world. These contacts, particularly with Saudi Arabia, brought an increase in the import of religious literature, and in funding, which was utilised for the construction of mosques and religious schools. The early 1990s also saw a growth in the number of Saudi-educated Ethiopians returning home to offer teaching in these mosques and schools».

<sup>290</sup> Østebø, T., cit., 426. «Recruitment to the Salafi movement has been rather limited in urban areas. The mosque has been the main arena of recruitment in towns, where certain mosques, dominated by a Salafi imam or home to individuals providing teaching along Salafi lines, have been instrumental in propagating the new ideas. In Addis Ababa, the dawa has to some extent also been done through the spreading of audio- and video-cassettes. In contrast, the movement has had more success in the rural areas, where it has been able to recruit a large number of young males, particularly in Oromo-speaking areas. Many are recruited through an increasingly elaborated system of rural religious schools (*jamaat*) dominated by a Salafi ulama educated either in Saudi Arabia or by disciples of these Saudi-educated ulama».

destroyed in night attacks, highlighting the contentious nature of historical commemorations. One notable instance occurred in 1992 in Axum, where tensions arose when Muslims sought permission to build a mosque in the ancient town. Christian clerics opposed the proposal, considering Axum a sacred place. Similar incidents occurred in other regions, with clashes arising from spatial proximity during religious celebrations. Tensions between Christians and Muslims escalated notably in the fall of 2006, as violent clashes erupted in Gimma and Begi, with reported connections to the Salafi movement. A group known as the Kharijite was accused of torching churches and attempting to forcibly convert Christians to Islam. It's important to note that these conflicts, while more coordinated than previous ones, were not primarily political but demonstrated how purist Salafi groups could engage in vigilantism to preserve what they perceive as religious purity, whether in relation to other Muslims or non-Muslims. This exclusivist stance was taken by groups like Takfir wal Hijrah and others advocating stricter separation from Christians. However, these views gained limited support among Salafis at large. Most Salafi ulama in Addis Ababa and the Salafi community as a whole did not endorse such views of segregation and enmity toward Christians.

The process of de-democratization<sup>291</sup> has had widespread ramifications throughout Ethiopian society, restricting opportunities for political opposition and eroding possibilities for contesting the regime. An important inquiry in this context pertains to whether the regime demonstrates heightened concern regarding developments within the Muslim community, displaying greater vigilance toward this sphere and being more resolute in monitoring, controlling, and suppressing undesirable developments. The recent involvement in Islamic affairs through the promotion of the al-Abhash movement suggests a leaning in this direction. It is also noteworthy that during the al-Ahbash-led training in the fall of 2011, the “Wahhabis” were characterized as anti-constitutional and anti-developmental, further underscoring the regime’s posture in this regard.

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<sup>291</sup> *Ibi*, 247-248.

Starting from the mid-1990s, the ruling party grew increasingly concerned about the changing religious landscape in Ethiopia. This unease stemmed from the expansion of religious activities, particularly the proliferation of various Islamic reform movements. These developments were perceived as signs of the politicization of Islam, and they were exacerbated by the post-9/11 global war on terror and regional political dynamics, notably the situation in Somalia<sup>292</sup>. While the peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia is often lauded both within the country and by external observers, there is merit in Husayn Ahmed's (2006) call for a reconsideration of the notion of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia as a distinctive case of inter-religious tolerance and coexistence. The central argument here is that peaceful coexistence is largely facilitated by a historical asymmetrical relationship between Christians and Muslims. This relationship is rooted in the close association between the church and state, wherein Christianity became an integral part of the history of "Greater Ethiopia." Christians perceived themselves as the core of "Ethiopianness" and accommodated the presence of Muslims without including them in the concept of nationhood. This historical backdrop has led to an unequal religious dynamic at the grassroots level, with clearly defined positions and statuses for each group, shaping their respective identities, delineating boundaries, and upholding this asymmetrical relationship<sup>293</sup>. The EPRDF, for more than a decade, sought to address and rectify this historical legacy, recognizing and celebrating Ethiopia's diversity through ethnic federalism. The party leadership argued that Ethiopia, as a national entity and concept, did not exist. This stance has had significant consequences and has resulted in increased tensions between Muslims and the state. At this juncture, there is a risk that this policy may have adverse effects on the regime itself, potentially worsening relations between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. For Christians, who have been monitoring developments within the Muslim community, the explicit labelling of "Wahhabis" as extremists and the harsh characterization of their ideology are likely to heighten their apprehensions. This not only reinforces Christians' perceptions of Islam but also signals that the regime is taking the "Islamic threat" seriously. It implies that the

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<sup>292</sup> Erlich, H., cit., 249-250.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibi*, 250-254.



battle against this perceived threat is no longer solely the concern of Christians and churches; it now has the endorsement and support of the state.

Additionally, this policy shift may exacerbate intra-religious tensions within the Muslim community. Those opposing the “Wahhabis” may interpret the regime’s stigmatization as an endorsement of their version of Islam and as a pathway to forming an alliance with political authorities, potentially gaining resources to reclaim religious territory. On the other hand, the “Wahhabis” may view the labelling of them as extremists as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The evolving dynamics in Ethiopia’s religious landscape, influenced by changing state policies and historical legacies, underscore the complex interplay between religion, politics, and identity in the country.

Another noteworthy development is the active engagement of Ethiopian Muslims in ongoing debates within the independent media sphere. They are increasingly participating in discussions concerning the history and role of their religious community in Ethiopia and the broader global context <sup>294</sup>. This heightened involvement extends to interactions with the wider Islamic world, as more Ethiopian Muslims travel abroad for educational and employment opportunities. The quota for the *Hajj* pilgrimage has also been significantly

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<sup>294</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 271. «Their pace and intensity have increased, reflecting the renewed self-consciousness of faith communities but also giving the impression of verbal warfare. Indeed, a content analysis of religious polemics shows that they have turned into full-blown apologetics, defending their own faith at all costs, inhibiting rational exchanges, and showing a very tenuous relation to the facts. Indeed, the polemics are framed in a closed epistemology of unassailable supernatural 'truths' that does not allow refutation or critique. As such, religious polemics go on to predominate in public discourse and are less easily suppressed by the government than oppositional political debate. The effects of polemic exchanges in this sense are a redrawing of boundaries, discursive over-confidence if not recklessness, decline of dialogue and toleration, and deep rivalry, extending into the social and even demographic sphere. While these developments are a fascinating subject for the study of religious identity formation, the politics of religion, and religious experience itself, the social effects of polemical escalation amount to blighting the relations between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. These effects seep down from the urban areas, where most activists and propagandists operate, to the countryside, where people of different religious persuasion were usually getting along and now have to face its negative aspect»

expanded, and Islamic activists, scholars, and educators from the Middle East are increasingly coming to Ethiopia to contribute to their interpretation of Islam. Various groups from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Libya are particularly active in these endeavours, including missionary activities. It is important to highlight that the Ethiopian government has engaged in verbal disputes<sup>295</sup> with the Islamist regime in Sudan and has been involved in actual armed conflicts in Somalia against specific Islamist Somali groups like Al-Ittihad, operating in the southern border area. The government is also vigilant in monitoring similar-minded groups within Ethiopia, such as the IFLO (Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia), a minority Muslim movement among the Oromo with an exclusivist and anti-Christian agenda. Consequently, the initial openness of the current government towards the Muslim world and Islamic revivalism in Ethiopia may gradually diminish. In Ethiopia, ongoing religious polemics will further shape the evolving landscape of communal relations and rivalries within a politically constrained environment. While the majority of publications and media produced by both Muslim and Christian communities continue to address their respective constituencies, urging adherents to deepen their commitment to their faith's principles, their influence extends beyond their religious circles. Religious thought is progressively becoming the dominant framework through which political decisions and policies are evaluated. Recent polemics have adopted an intentionally confrontational style, seemingly crafted to discredit the faith of the

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<sup>295</sup> Abbink, J., cit., 260. «[...] two Ethiopian (Harari) Muslim religious figures: Sheikh Abdallah ibn Muhammad al Harari, the leader of Sufist-oriented Islam and principled advocate of religious coexistence and Ethiopian Islam,<sup>23</sup> and Sheikh Yusuf t'Abd al-Rahman, a Saudi-Arabia-trained Salafist-Wahhabist-leaning leader.<sup>24</sup> While they both lived outside Ethiopia for long periods, at times banned by the government, they inspired a new round of Verbal warfare' in the 1990s about their respective approaches to Islam, both based in Islamic theology. Sheikh Abdallah had built up an important civic-religious movement in Lebanon after his exile, but retained influence in Ethiopia through his many writings, while Sheikh Yusuf also continued to influence events in Ethiopia (notably in the Muslim education system and in the turn to Salafist 'reform movements') from his home base in Saudi Arabia. Their rivalry can also be seen as a religious polemic on specific points of Islamic doctrine,<sup>25</sup> and remained important throughout the post-1991 period. Many Islamic polemical exchanges in Ethiopia hence still move between the two poles of this debate».

opposing party. Notions of coexistence and mutual tolerance have begun to be challenged by Islamist supremacy, the conversion of non-believers, and the establishment of a Muslim state in Ethiopia. On the Pentecostalist front, one can also discern discourses of isolationism and a sense of superiority, albeit more inwardly directed and primarily in competition with the Orthodox Church <sup>296</sup>. Ethiopia's national and international relations have been difficult, producing a border policy of a protective nature. Since 2014, Ethiopia has been embroiled in a political crisis. In that year, a significant social movement challenged the dominance of the Revolutionary Democratic Front of the Ethiopian People, which had been in power since 1991. Initially, the protesters opposed a development plan that envisaged the expansion of the capital, Addis Ababa, into the lands of peasants in the neighbouring Oromia region. As their demands extended to encompass greater social justice and democracy, repression escalated, resulting in hundreds of casualties. In 2016, tensions over land access escalated into violent clashes between the Oromia and Somali regions, and in 2017-2018 in the Guji-Gedeo zone and Benishangul-Gumuz.

Jeudi 16 juillet, trois régions éthiopiennes, pourtant non limitrophes du Tigré, l'Oromia- la plus vaste et la plus peuplée située au centre du pays-, le Sidama et la Région des Nations, nationalités et peuples du Sud (SNNPR)- toutes deux voisines de l'Oromia-, ont confirmé le déploiement de « forces spéciales » pour contenir les opérations militaires sur le front tigréen. Un soutien armé qui ouvre la voie à un élargissement du conflit. René Lefort, chercheur indépendant et spécialiste de la Corne de l'Afrique évoque le risque « d'une situation à la syrienne ». <sup>297</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> *Ibi*, 273-74.

<sup>297</sup> Sinnes, R., Du Tigré à l'Oromia, l'Éthiopie au bord d'une guerre tribale généralisée, 2021, in <https://information.tv5monde.com>. (transl.) « On Thursday, July 16th, three Ethiopian regions, despite not sharing borders with Tigray - Oromia, the largest and most populous region located

These conflicts are now part of a broader civil war with two main theatres: Tigray and Oromia. From November 2020 to November 2022, the federal government allied with Eritrea and received support from the Amhara region to confront the TDF, gathered around the TPLF). In Oromia, the government faces the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which controls vast rural areas. The war is being conducted behind closed doors, with journalists and humanitarian workers hindered from operating freely. Between July 2021 and the spring of 2022, Tigray experienced a genuine siege, resulting in famine. Many political figures called for the extermination of all Tigrayans. If these conflicts take on an identity dimension, it is because ethnicity was established as the foundation of political representation under the regime. Since 1995, Ethiopia has been divided into regions meant to represent the habitation areas of the main ethnolinguistic groups. Each group enjoys autonomy in its region and elects representatives to Parliament. To understand this system, we must go back to the 1960s. At that time, Addis Ababa University saw a student movement denouncing the dominance of Christian Amharas from the North over Ethiopia. In 1974, the desired revolution was hijacked by a military junta. When the junta was overthrown after 17 years of civil war, the EPRDF was led by former students of the 1960s. They worked to establish this system that recognized peripheral identities, even if it meant strengthening them. This recognition went hand in hand with the repression of many opponents. Elections were held without real competition, and party members monitored their neighbours. When he took office as prime minister in 2018, Abiy Ahmed, who presented himself as a “reformer” within the EPRDF, effectively ended this regime, renaming the party the Prosperity Party and redefining its ideological orientation. He announced privatizations and the opening of protected sectors, abandoning the model of “developmental state” - heavy state intervention in the economy. He also

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in the center of the country, Sidama, and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR), both neighbouring Oromia - confirmed the deployment of “special forces” to contain military operations on the Tigray front. This armed support paves the way for an expansion of the conflict. René Lefort, an independent researcher and specialist in the Horn of Africa, mentions the risk of “a situation similar to Syria”».

gradually asserted his opposition to the institutional system of ethnic federalism aimed at ensuring equal representation for all Ethiopian peoples.

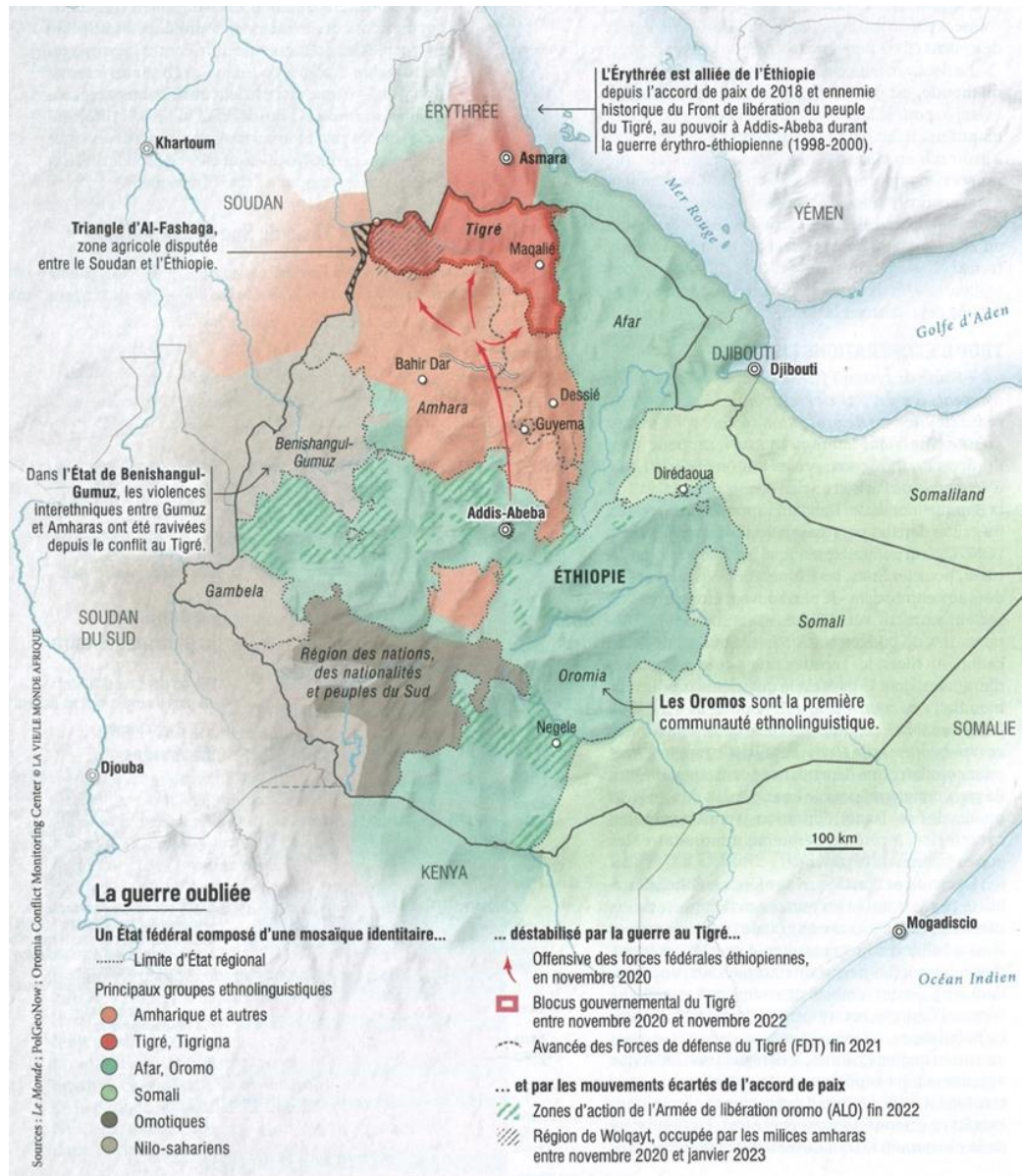


Figure 3.2 - Tigré, la guerre oubliée

The current crisis pits two visions of the Ethiopian state against each other: federalist and recognizing the political role of ethnicity, or centralizing and assimilationist. The TPLF and OLA lean toward the former; Abiy Ahmed's government and Amhara nationalists prefer the latter. Amhara nationalist

movements aspire to their people's "revenge," considering them the "holders" of history and custodians of Ethiopian culture. Irredentist, they annexed western Tigray in the early weeks of the war, resulting in ethnic cleansing. As Haggai Erlich said, region's history represents a varied reservoir of religious legacies that continue to offer both neighbourliness and enmity<sup>298</sup>. The Ethiopian policy of containment has not leading to the sealing of its borders, that are vast and porous, difficult to control, and characterized also by the movements of pastoralist<sup>299</sup>.

The post-1991 period has brought increased communication with the wider Islamic world, potentially strengthening translocal and transnational Islamic movements in Ethiopia. Therefore, the relationship between ethnicity and religion in Ethiopia is complex and dynamic, with both factors playing significant roles in shaping identities and affiliations<sup>300</sup>. House's proclamation in June 2020 granting equal status represents a historic response to the challenges faced by Ethiopian Muslims in modern history. It carries several implications: acknowledging the historical longevity of Islam in Ethiopia helps dispel the securitization of Islam and Ethiopian Muslims, promoting a sense of pride in their rich history comparable to that of Christianity. It recognizes also Ethiopian Muslims as a religious society with a heritage dating back to the early days of Islam, providing them with a sense of collective ownership over their history. The legal provision aligns with the current demographic reality of Ethiopian Muslims, who constitute a significant portion of the population. It removes legal obstacles, allowing their apolitical activities to proceed smoothly. Finally granting equal status dispels the siege mentality associated with Ethiopian Muslims, altering hostile perceptions and challenging the notion of them as a threat. This proclamation serves as an instrument for Ethiopian Muslims to reassert their shared identity as an apolitical community rooted in their rich history and their homeland, Ethiopia. It signifies a significant step forward in recognizing

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<sup>298</sup> Erlich, H. (2023). *Ethiopia and the Middle East*. Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner, *passim*.

<sup>299</sup> Desplat, & Østebø, T., cit., 15-18.

<sup>300</sup> Østebø, T., cit., 435-439.

religious diversity and equality within the Ethiopian state<sup>301</sup>. In 2011, Ethiopia witnessed significant developments in its religious landscape. During this year, the secular EPRDF regime, in an unusual move, became involved in internal Muslim affairs, leading to intriguing events that highlighted the convergence of seemingly disparate forces shaping the ideological direction of Islam in Ethiopia. At the center of this narrative is the rising influence of the Lebanese organization known as al-Ahbash, facilitated by the Ethiopian government. Al-Ahbash, officially named the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP), is headquartered in Beirut. While initially less known, it gained prominence in Lebanese politics during the 1980s and gradually transformed into a transnational Islamic organization with a presence across the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Europe, North America, and Australia. Al-Ahbash's distinctive ideological roots draw from both Sunni and Shi'a theology, with Sufi spiritualism playing a central role in its character.

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<sup>301</sup> Mekonnen, E. *Proclamation finally decrees equality for Ethiopian Muslims*, in <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com>.

## Conclusion

The religious landscape of Ethiopia is a complex tapestry woven over centuries, marked by the coexistence and interactions of multiple faith traditions. As of the most recent census in 2007, the Ethiopian population's religious affiliations are diverse, with Christianity and Islam standing as the two major faiths. Approximately 44 percent of Ethiopians adhere to EOTC, while 34 percent identify as Sunni Muslims. Additionally, 19 percent of the population belongs to Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups. This diversity reflects the rich history of religious pluralism within the country.

To understand the current dynamics between these religious communities, it is crucial to delve into Ethiopia's historical context. Going back to the tenth century, independent Muslim polities coexisted with the Christian kingdom in the northwestern Ethiopian highlands. While trade relations fostered mutual recognition, occasional competition and mistrust led to conflicts between these Muslim powers and the Christian kingdom. During the later part of the nineteenth century, an imperial state emerged, primarily grounded in Christian allegiance. This transformation forcibly integrated Muslim subjects into the new territorial structure of the Ethiopian state, resulting in discrimination and marginalization. The historical context of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia is indispensable for comprehending the intricacies of their present interactions. The religious factor has played a fundamental role in shaping connections from the era of slavery and the slave trade to contemporary coexistence. One notable feature of religious coexistence in Ethiopia is the unique nature of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage in Ethiopia is trans-religious, with both Christian and Muslim believers participating in these long processions, sometimes driven by curiosity.

These pilgrimage centers, known for their trans-religious character, serve as meeting points and places of coexistence for various religious practices. As described by Pankhurst, they are meeting places for people coming from various localities and ethnic groups" and serve as spaces where boundaries, be they ethnic, political, or religious, can be transcended. Donald Levine's research sheds light on the motivations behind these pilgrimages, highlighting their pan-



Ethiopian nature. Pilgrimages not only unite followers of Islam and Christianity, but they also bring together individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. One prominent example of religious coexistence in Ethiopia is the Faraqasa system, a collection of Muslim sanctuaries scattered across the country. These sanctuaries transcend political, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries, serving as shared spaces for both Muslims and Christians to engage in religious observance. While religious boundaries are not entirely erased, they are temporarily shifted, fostering encounters and coexistence between believers and the spirits.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a resurgence of Ethiopian Christian nationalism following the establishment of Islam in the region. This period marked the formation of the modern Ethiopian state, characterized by policies of expansion and modernization centered around the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia. Many peripheral territories and populations, including Muslims, were incorporated into this state. Despite this, Muslims faced challenges in obtaining full citizenship status and were often perceived as deviating from the Ethiopian identity.

Historically, Ethiopian rulers exhibited tolerance toward Muslim traders and intermediaries while harbouring reservations about their inclusion in significant state positions, particularly within the Christian-dominated areas. Muslims were consistently excluded from acquiring hereditary land rights, a notable feature in highland Ethiopian Christianity. However, within their communities, Muslims enjoyed a degree of autonomy, especially in matters related to religious jurisprudence.

The nineteenth century also witnessed the rise of European empires, which facilitated the horizontal integration of Muslim communities across geographical barriers. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 greatly increased Muslim mobility across various European colonial empires. Markets and fairs played a crucial role in the interaction between merchants, enslaved individuals, and different religious traditions. These markets, including those in Gondar, Gimma, Gojjam, Scioa, Harar, Gondar, and Adwa, were fundamental institutions of trade and continued to facilitate the sale of enslaved individuals

well into the twentieth century. The internal demand for enslaved labor contributed to the persistence of this troubling practice.

Slavery, characterized as endemic to Ethiopian society, transcended changing borders throughout its historical evolution. This distinction is essential, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of slavery and the domestic trade of enslaved individuals in East Africa. Unfortunately, this aspect of Ethiopian history has often been underrepresented in historical discourse and remains insufficiently commemorated to this day. The *Kebra Negast* regulated the purchase, ownership, and manumission of slaves in Ethiopia. It expressly prohibited the sale of Christians to non-believers, while allowing Christians to buy slaves but not to participate in their sale. Islamic tradition, on the other hand, dictated that enslavement should occur during war or raids, leading to slave raids and conflicts in the southernmost regions of Ethiopia. This differential treatment allowed Muslims to establish a monopoly on the selling of slaves, strengthening their exports to regions such as Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, and India.

Ethiopian rulers' attempts to regulate or prohibit the slave trade encountered significant challenges. The population did not universally perceive slavery as inherently evil, and Ethiopia was surrounded by slave raiders and traders on all sides. Additionally, there was no comprehensive effort to eradicate the trade.

It was only after the passing of Emperor Yohannes that Ethiopia began to embrace a somewhat more benevolent approach toward its Muslim constituents in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After 1944, Islamic courts were recognized for personal, family, and inheritance matters without persecution or conversion campaigns against Muslims. In daily life, relations between Muslims and Christians tended to be harmonious, perhaps due to mutual unfamiliarity with each other's religious beliefs. Emperor Haile Selassie I who stated, "The country is a public matter, religion is a private matter".

The 1955 Revised Constitution, while aiming to modernize Ethiopia's governance and enhance its international reputation, faced challenges amid a

rapidly changing political landscape. The Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 led to the abolition of the monarchy by the Derg, a Marxist-Leninist military junta. This upheaval marked a turning point in Ethiopian history, with profound implications for the nation's political structure and governance. The Ethiopian Constitution of 1994 stands as a fundamental moment in the nation's history, reflecting a commitment to fundamental human rights and freedoms. Chapter 3, Article 27, addresses Freedom of Religion, Belief, and Opinion, which is particularly significant given Ethiopia's diverse religious landscape. This article not only enshrines the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion but also underscores the right to manifest one's religion or belief. It allows for the establishment of religious institutions and safeguards against coercion or discrimination based on religious convictions. Moreover, it outlines the conditions under which limitations to religious freedom can be imposed, balancing individual rights with the broader interests of society. In the context of Ethiopia's historical struggles with religious tensions and conflicts, Article 27 represents a triumph of inclusivity and tolerance. It is a legal framework that recognizes the importance of religious diversity and ensures the protection and respect of the rights and liberties of all Ethiopians, regardless of their religious beliefs.

However, it is essential to note that the Ethiopian government's increasing authoritarianism has curtailed political and societal activities, including those within the Muslim community. The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (ELASC) has emerged as a primary actor closely aligned with the regime, effectively monitoring and controlling developments among Muslims.

In contrast to neighboring Somalia, where Islam holds a dominant position, Ethiopia presents a different state-religious community dynamic. It has a balance of religious communities, with Islam as a significant minority (34%) and strong state surveillance over organized religion, including Orthodox Christianity. While Ethiopia has not witnessed escalating Christian or Islamist-inspired terrorist violence in recent decades, incidents of religiously motivated violence, such as burnings of mosques and churches and targeted religious killings, have occurred. Small radical-militant Muslim groups and Takfiris

(radicals declaring other Muslims as “enemy”) were reported in the late 1990s but have been suppressed and monitored.

In the contemporary Ethiopian political discourse, ethnicity has taken center stage, dissolving all conflicts and social issues into ethnic identities. Religious identification, too, has been drawn into this framework, with individuals often identifying not only as Muslim or Christian but also as members of specific ethnic groups. This has become a determinant of political debate, economic and educational policies, and regional and local administration. It is considered the prism through which people’s democratic rights are realized.

In June 2020, House’s proclamation granted equal status to Ethiopian Muslims, marking a historic response to the challenges faced by this community in modern history. This proclamation carries significant implications. Firstly, it acknowledges the historical longevity of Islam in Ethiopia, dispelling the securitization of Islam and Ethiopian Muslims. It promotes a sense of pride in their rich history, comparable to that of Christianity, and recognizes Ethiopian Muslims as a religious society with a heritage dating back to the early days of Islam. Importantly, it aligns with the current demographic reality of Ethiopian Muslims, who constitute a significant portion of the population. Furthermore, this legal provision removes obstacles that hindered their apolitical activities and dispels the siege mentality associated with Ethiopian Muslims. It alters hostile perceptions and challenges the notion of them as a threat. In essence, this proclamation serves as an instrument for Ethiopian Muslims to reassert their shared identity as an apolitical community rooted in their rich history and homeland, Ethiopia. It signifies a significant step forward in recognizing religious diversity and equality within the Ethiopian state.

In sum, Ethiopia’s religious landscape is a testament to the enduring coexistence and interactions of diverse faith traditions. Its historical complexities, from Christian-Muslim relations to the legacy of slavery, have shaped its present religious dynamics. The Ethiopian Constitution of 1994, particularly Article 27, represents a commitment to religious freedom and inclusivity in a diverse society. However, contemporary challenges, including political authoritarianism and the ethnicization of identity, continue to impact religious communities. The

recent proclamation granting equal status to Ethiopian Muslims marks a positive development in recognizing their historical and cultural contributions, fostering a sense of inclusivity and equality in the nation. Ethiopia's journey through its religious history serves as a rich tapestry that reflects the enduring spirit of coexistence and adaptation in the face of evolving socio-political landscapes.

## Summary of Findings

The research conducted in this PhD thesis examines the religious landscape of Ethiopia, with a particular focus on the coexistence and interactions between Christianity and Islam. The key findings and insights can be summarized as follows:

1. **Historical Context of Religious Relations:** to understand the present dynamics between religious communities in Ethiopia, the research explores the historical context. It reveals that Ethiopia's history is marked by both cooperation and competition between Christian and Muslim powers, with the emergence of an imperial state predominantly founded on Christian allegiance. This transformation led to the marginalization of Muslim subjects.
2. **Trans-Religious Pilgrimages and Sanctuaries:** one unique aspect of religious coexistence in Ethiopia is the trans-religious nature of pilgrimages. Both Christian and Muslim believers participate in these pilgrimages, creating opportunities for shared religious observance and encounters between different ethnic backgrounds. The research highlights the existence of trans-religious sanctuaries like the Faraqasa system, which transcend political, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries. These sanctuaries serve as spaces for shared religious practices and coexistence between Muslims and Christians.
3. **Persistence and abolition of Slavery and Slave Trade:** despite changing political landscapes and efforts to abolish slavery, the research reveals that markets and fairs in Ethiopia continued to facilitate the sale of enslaved individuals well into the twentieth century. Slavery was characterized as endemic to Ethiopian society, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the domestic slave trade.
4. ***Kebra Negast* and Muslim Monopoly:** the research uncovers that differential treatment based on religious affiliations allowed Muslims to

establish a monopoly on the selling of slaves. This dynamic was rooted in historical texts like the Kebra Negast and had profound implications for the trade.

5. **Challenges in Regulating the Slave Trade:** Ethiopian rulers' attempts to regulate or prohibit the slave trade faced significant challenges, including the population's varying perceptions of slavery and the presence of slave raiders and traders on all sides.
6. **Secularization and Equal Rights as an Inclusive Approach:** the post-1974 revolution era witnessed a shift towards secular orientations, with Muslims gradually gaining recognition and equal rights within their communities and beyond. This period marked a pushback against government interference and suspicions that Muslims might serve as conduits for external threats. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ethiopia began embracing a more inclusive approach towards its Muslim constituents. Islamic courts were recognized, and relations between Muslims and Christians tended to be harmonious in day-to-day interactions.
7. **Modern Legal Framework:** the Ethiopian Constitution of 1994, particularly Article 27, stands as a significant legal framework that upholds religious freedom, enshrining the right to thought, conscience, and religion. It promotes inclusivity and tolerance in a diverse religious landscape. A significant finding is the 2020 proclamation granting equal status to Ethiopian Muslims. This proclamation acknowledges their historical contributions, dispels stereotypes, and fosters inclusivity and equality within the nation
8. **Challenges in Contemporary Ethiopia:** Contemporary challenges, such as political authoritarianism and the ethnicization of identity, have impacted religious communities in Ethiopia. The research highlights the need to address these challenges to ensure continued coexistence and harmony.

In summary, this PhD thesis provides a comprehensive examination of Ethiopia's religious landscape, tracing its historical evolution and highlighting contemporary challenges and opportunities for religious coexistence. The research underscores the importance of recognizing and respecting religious diversity as an integral part of Ethiopia's rich cultural heritage.



## Contributions to the Field

This research contributes significantly to the academic understanding of Ethiopia's political and religious dynamics:

1. **Political Landscape Analysis:** the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Ethiopia's political landscape, from the EPRDF era to the present. It offers valuable insights into the ideological shifts that have taken place and their far-reaching implications for the nation's governance.
2. **Ethnic Federalism Impact:** this research delves into the impact of ethnic federalism on Ethiopia's identity and the challenges it poses to national cohesion. The study underscores the delicate balance between recognizing ethnic diversity and maintaining national unity.
3. **Religion and Politics:** by exploring the intricate relationship between religion and politics in Ethiopia, this study emphasizes the historical context while shedding light on contemporary developments. It underscores the significance of religious dynamics in shaping Ethiopia's socio-political landscape.
4. **Ethnicity's Role:** this research highlights the central role of ethnicity in Ethiopian politics and its potential implications for peace and stability. It underscores the need for nuanced policy approaches that consider the multifaceted nature of ethnic identities within the nation.

## Suggestions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, several avenues for future research merit consideration:

1. **In-depth Ethnic Studies:** future research could delve deeper into specific ethnic groups and their experiences within Ethiopia's evolving political landscape. Understanding their perspectives on identity, governance, and socio-economic opportunities is crucial for addressing disparities.
2. **Media and Communication:** the role of media and communication in shaping public perceptions and political discourse in Ethiopia remains a critical area of study. Investigating the influence of media outlets and social networks on political narratives is essential.
3. **Comparative Analyses:** comparative analyses with other countries that have undergone similar shifts in political ideology and governance models can provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Ethiopia.
4. **Regional and International Implications:** examining how Ethiopia's internal dynamics affect its regional and international relations is essential. Geopolitical factors and regional alliances play a significant role in shaping the nation's trajectory.
5. **Marginalized Communities:** research focusing on the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities, including internally displaced persons and refugees, within Ethiopia's evolving political and religious landscape can inform policies aimed at promoting inclusivity and peace.

## Glossary

1. *Abiotawi Demokrasi*: i.e. revolutionary democracy. Slogan used in the 80's by Tigray People's Liberation Front. The aim of the TPLF was to focus attention on the Tigray issue along with the national issue, while rejecting the notion of proletarian revolution and pan-Ethiopian struggle.
2. *Abuna*: is the highest ecclesiastical authority in Ethiopia, and literally means "our father". The first *abuna* of Ethiopia was St. Frumentius. The *abuna* is considered as a purchased person, that is, as the most valuable of slaves. It is up to him to consecrate the *negus*, grant the Holy Orders and bless the Tabot, i.e. the Tables of the Law. In Ethiopia, the temporal and spiritual powers have always cooperated under one direction for the same purpose, as in the case of the dethronement of the *negus neghesti* Ligg Yasu, which took place in 1916 by *Abuna* Matteos in agreement with the new Empress Zeoditù, the regent Tafari and the major dignitaries of the court. The Church of Ethiopia depends on the state.
3. *Arbennyoch*: i.e. patriots. Term referring to those "patriots" who participated in the Ethiopian resistance in the regions outside Addis Ababa after the Italian invasion conducted by Mussolini in 1935.
4. *Askari*: this term identifies an Eritrean soldier framed as a regular component in the so-called *Regi Corpi Truppe Coloniali*, the Italian colonial forces in Italian East Africa.
5. *Baitos*: i.e. elected village assemblies. Successful system created by TPLF in the mid 80's which gave the Tigrayan peasants a total democratic control of the province of Tigray, promoting land distribution, social reforms and environmental protection.
6. *Dabtara*: in the cultural milieu of the Beta Israel community and within the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Churches, a *debtera* (or *dabtara*) fulfils the role of an itinerant religious practitioner. This individual leads congregational worship through singing and dancing, while also conducting exorcisms and practicing medicinal magic.
7. *Dawah*: an Arabic term that refers to the Islamic practice of inviting others to learn about and embrace Islam. It encompasses various forms of outreach and communication aimed at spreading the teachings and beliefs of Islam to non-Muslims and inviting them to consider and accept the faith.
8. *Deggiaç*: term used to identify the title of Commander of the Centre, or Marquis. The title, in the Abyssinian hierarchy, is found between that of *Bituotted*, that is, "having a noble title", and *Fitaurari*, that is, Commander of the Avant-garde, therefore Earl.

9. *Derg*: is a committee created from March to June 1974 together with other committees of the same type, for this *dergs*, which may differ from other committees by political and ideological direction and which aspires to simple organizational reforms or violent revolutionary acts. The Derg was made up of conspiracy groups of young officers and non-commissioned officers, the NCOs.
10. *Dervish*: with this term is defined the resistance movement of the so-called *Somali Dervish*. The armed resistance was directed against the colonial powers present in the Horn of Africa (Italy and United Kingdom), between 1899 and 1920. The objective was the destruction of the colonial state, the defeat of the Ethiopian forces and the creation of a Muslim state. The leader of the resistance was Mohammed Abdullah Hassan.
11. *Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church*: is an autocephalous Oriental Orthodox Christian denomination headquartered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It traces its roots to the 4th century CE when it became the state religion of Ethiopia under King Ezana. The church follows miaphysitism, a belief in the single nature of Christ. It historically diverged from the Chalcedonian Christian tradition but has engaged in ecumenical dialogue in recent years.
12. *Ghebbbar*: term that refers to those indigenous families in the conquering countries who were assigned to Abyssinian soldiers to provide for their maintenance, making their land available, building houses at their own expense, providing them with all services and work required and obtaining no remuneration.
13. *Gurage*: population living in southwestern Ethiopia, bordering the Awash River, the Gibe River tributary of the Omo and Lake Zwaya. They are thought to have originated from an expedition south from the Kingdom of Aksum, later divided.
14. *Hadith*: in Islamic tradition, refers to a narrated report or account of the sayings, actions, or approvals of Prophet Muhammad. These reports are considered authoritative sources of guidance for Muslims and play a crucial role in interpreting and understanding the teachings of Islam. *Hadiths* are typically categorized into various levels of authenticity based on the reliability of the chain of narrators and the content, with the most trusted ones being referred to as “*Sahih*” or authentic *hadiths*.
15. *Hajj*: the annual Islamic pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, which is a religious obligation for Muslims to undertake at least once in their lifetime if they are physically and financially able to do so.
16. *Hibrete-sebaninet*: i.e. socialism, as it was conceived by the PMAC after the promulgation of the Ten Points Program on December 20, 1974.

17. *Hijra*: in the 7th century, adherents of the Prophet Mohammed emigrated from Arabia to Abyssinia, which encompasses present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. Here, they sought refuge in an ancient Christian kingdom. Referred to as the First Hijra, this event stands as a testament to a historical legacy characterized by mutual respect between different religions and ethnicities.
18. *Kebraska*: term referring to the Eritrean highlands, located on the border of the Ethiopian region of Tigray.
19. *Kebra Nagast*: also, *Kebra Negast* or *Fetha Nagast*, is an ancient Ethiopian text dating back to the 4th-6th centuries A.D., then recompiled in the 14th century. It is a religious, historical, archaeological reference text and it is to him that the legitimation of the practice of slavery is owed, at least until it was abolished. The main source is the Old Testament with additions from rabbinical texts, Coptic, Egyptian and Ethiopian legends.
20. *Lematawi habt*: refers to the “developmental capitalism” embraced in 2001 by the ruling party in place of post-Derg socialism.
21. *Ligg*: term used to describe, in the Abyssinian hierarchy, the so-called son of Nobles. The title is placed between that of *Uizzerò*, that is Princess, and *Blattà*, that is Counsellor of the Negus.
22. *Mengist*: a solemn declaration of power, i.e. the state power. It happened in 1930 with the Emperor Haile Selassie and also in 1974 when the Derg wanted to be a new and different “dynasty” in power.
23. *Negus Neghesti*: i.e. king of kings, identifies the title of Emperor of Ethiopia.
24. *Negus*: Ethiopian sovereign of a kingdom, under the power of the Negus Neghesti. In the 19th century, there were the *Negus* of Scioa, Gondar, Tigré and Gojjam. Hailé Selassie was the last *Negus Neghesti*, crowned in 1930 and despotised in 1974 following the military coup.
25. *Ras*: Ethiopian title assigned to a dignitary - of a rank immediately below the *Negus* - who had the authority in the area in which it governed. During the reign of Emperor Menelik II (1844-1913), only the leaders of the most important provinces, such as Tigray, Gojjam [...], were called *Ras*.
26. *Sharia courts*: legal institutions in predominantly Muslim countries that specialize in applying Islamic law, so-called *sharia* to matters like family law, inheritance, and personal status issues. They are staffed by experts in Islamic jurisprudence and make rulings based on Islamic legal principles. The extent of their authority and relationship with secular legal systems varies by country.

27. *Tsehafe tezaz*: is an ancient title that was granted to the so-called Minister of the Pen. After the end of the Second World War and until 1960 was hired by Wolde-Giyorgis Wolde-Yohannes. Proximity to the Emperor made the bearer of this title a right-hand man, hence the Prime Minister.
28. *Uizerò*: term with which the title of Princess is outlined, in the Abyssinian hierarchy. The title is placed between that of *Ras*, that is Head of Region or King, and *Ligg*, that is son of Nobles.
29. *Umma*: signifies primarily the community of believers, specifically referring to the “community of Muslims”. Importantly, it carries no implicit connotations related to ethnicity, language or even culture.
30. *Woredas*: they are the third level subdivision of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and correspond to the so-called *districts*. The first level are the regions, and the second level are the so-called *zones*. Woreda refers to a territorial subdivision which is in fact hierarchically superordinated. There are special woredas, others dating back to the ancient kingdoms of Abyssinia, and others of recent constitution.
31. *Zemene misafint*: term referring to the so-called *era of princes*, which started in 1769 and ended in 1855. Was a period of feudal anarchy. After 1855, the various rulers including Tewodros, Yohannes IV (1837-1889) (1837-1889) and Menelik II (1844-1913) will commit their politico-military efforts to the re-centralization of the imperial power.
32. *Zemetcha*: 1974 campaign supported by the PMAC, i.e. the Provisional Military Administrative Council, aimed at collaboration for the education of the masses.

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## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES, LECTURES AND COURSES

1. ISOLA (International Society for the Oral Literatures of Africa), the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations of France, Sorbonne Nouvelle University, and Paris Nanterre University. (2023, July 5-8). *14th ISOLA international conference Humans and non-humans in African verbal arts: narrativity and environmental poetics at the dawn of the climate crisis - panel 7: Preservation and Ecological Consciousness*, moderated by Professor Daniela Merolla.
2. ISPI School of Milan. (2022). *Course on Geopolitics of Migrations*. On-demand.
3. McGill University of Canada and the Indian Ocean World Centre. (2023, May 24-26). *I Conference and Workshop of the IOWC Network for Slavery, Bondage, and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World - panel 7: Long-Term Approaches to the Present: Legacies, Memory, and Climate Change*. Online
4. Tangaza University College in Nairobi and Foundation for Religious Sciences of Bologna. (2021, April 6-14). *Sources, and Critical-Historical Methods for The Research of Religion*. Online.
5. Uniacque Spa - Water Week 2023 - Bergamo Brescia 2023 Italian Capital of Culture. (2023, April 14). *Slot 4 - Water and Geopolitics*, moderated by Tommaso Perrone, director of Life Gate.
6. VI Biennial Conference of ASAI Association for African Studies at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. The conference, titled: *Africas of the Third Millennium in the Global World. Challenges, Reconfigurations, and Opportunities* took place from June 29 to July 1, 2022. I actively participated as a speaker (together with Davide Chinigò, Dario Miccoli, Stefano Picciaredda, and Leila El Houssi) within Panel 22 – “The Africas” in global history: methodologies, revisions, case studies - coordinated by Professors Paolo Borruso and Giorgio Musso, with Prof. Maria Stella Rognoni as discussant
7. Dentice, G. (2019, October). *Il Corno d’Africa tra rinnovata centralità internazionale e relazioni mutevoli con i vicini mediorientali*. Esercitazione corso

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## CARTOGRAPHY AND FIGURES

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- Fig. 1.1 Central Statistical Authority, Population and Housing Census, *Ethiopia – Religions*, 2007. Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the legacy of Meles Zenawi. Courtesy of Éloi Ficquet.
- Fig. 1.2 Central Statistical Authority, Population and Housing Census, *Orthodox Tewahedo Christians and their major places of worship*, 2007. Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the legacy of Meles Zenawi. Courtesy of Éloi Ficquet.
- Fig. 1.3 Central Statistical Authority, Population and Housing Census, *Ethiopia – Protestant Christians*, 2007. Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the legacy of Meles Zenawi. Courtesy of Éloi Ficquet.
- Fig. 1.4 Central Statistical Authority, Population and Housing Census, *Muslims and their major places of worship*, 2007. Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the legacy of Meles Zenawi. Courtesy of Éloi Ficquet.
- Fig. 1.5 *Principaux lieux de pèlerinage en Éthiopie*, courtesy of Alain Gascon and Bertrand Hirsch, Cahiers d'Études Africaines. <https://www.persee.fr>. Accessed June 2023.
- Fig. 1.6 *Pilgrimage centers of the Faraqasa connection*, 2016. “The formation of trans-religious pilgrimage centers in Southeast Ethiopia: Sitti Mumina and the Faraqasa connection” in Desplat & Østebø T. (2016). *Muslim Ethiopia: the Christian legacy identity politics and Islamic reformism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Courtesy of Minako Ishihara.

- Fig. 2.1 F.-X. Fauvelle and I. Surun (dir.), *Le royaume Gondarien XVIII<sup>e</sup> - XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 2019. Atlas historique de l'Afrique. Courtesy of La Vie / Le monde Afrique.
  
- Figure 2.2 – Pascal James Imperato, *Arthur Donaldson Smith's route during his 1894-1895 journey to Lake Rudolf*, 1998 in Imperato, J. (2018). *Quest For The Jade Sea: Colonial Competition Around An East African Lake*. Routledge. Courtesy of the drawer Saturnino B. Villapez.
  
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- Figure 3.1 – United Nations Peacekeeping, Sipri, Aclad & Centre d'études stratégiques de l'Afrique, *Risk map 2023 : des groupes djihadistes actifs*, 2023. Atlas historique de l'Afrique. Courtesy of La Vie / Le monde Afrique
  
- Figure 3.2 - PolGeoNow & Oromia Conflict Monitoring Center, *Tigré, la guerre oubliée*, 2023. Atlas historique de l'Afrique. Courtesy of La Vie / Le monde Afrique



## Appendix

The methodology employed in my PhD thesis is characterized by a multifaceted approach, integrating various research techniques and tools to ensure a comprehensive and rigorous analysis. Here are presented some other secondary research techniques:

- 1. Archival Research and Analysis of Printed Sources:** additionally, a significant facet of the research methodology involves extensive archival investigation. This process entails accessing archives of both Western and Afro-Asian origin, often containing unpublished documentation. These archives, predominantly in Western languages, provide access to a wealth of materials, including treaties, international agreements, parliamentary records, and a wide array of historical documents. The inclusion of archival sources significantly enhances the depth and authenticity of the research, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of Christian-Muslim relations. This PhD thesis extensively relies on the scrutiny of printed materials, encompassing a diverse array of written records such as diaries, letters, testimonials, memoirs, travelogues, and various historical documents. These written resources are of immense value, as they present a multitude of perspectives from both individuals and groups, thereby offering profound insights into the historical backdrop of Christian-Muslim interactions in Ethiopia. As part of the archival research endeavour, the researcher had the privilege of accessing the esteemed *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (BnF), renowned as one of France's preeminent public cultural institutions and ranking among the world's foremost libraries. The utilization of archival materials and printed sources constitutes a foundational cornerstone of this research methodology, enabling a thorough exploration of historical narratives, primary documents, and firsthand accounts pertaining to Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia. These sources furnish indispensable insights and historical evidence essential for the comprehensive analysis and interpretation of this intricate and consequential subject.

Furthermore, the extensive cartographic collection housed within this distinguished institution played a fundamental role in enhancing the visual dimension of this thesis. These maps and geographical resources provided invaluable spatial context and a deeper understanding of the regions and territories pertinent to the research. To ensure the preservation and accessibility of these invaluable cartographic resources, they underwent meticulous scanning and digitization in collaboration with a professional typography service. This digitization process allowed for the incorporation of high-quality visual aids within the thesis, enriching its content and providing readers with a more profound grasp of the geographical facets of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia. The integration of archival research, analysis of printed sources, and the inclusion of digitized cartographic materials underscores the comprehensive and multidimensional approach adopted in this research methodology. It exemplifies a dedication to thorough and rigorous scholarship, guaranteeing that the thesis offers a holistic exploration of the historical and geographical dimensions of the topic.

- 2. International and National Research Groups:** to compensate for the inability to engage in physical fieldwork, he sought alternative avenues for scholarly exploration. He drew upon my family's extensive two-decade experience on the African continent, particularly in Ethiopia, as a valuable source of insight. His grandfather lived in Addis Ababa from 1970 to 1980, invited by Emperor Haile Selassie to lead the *East African Aluminium Company*. Both his father and his grandfather were involved in construction projects under the direction of Princess Tenagnework Haile Selassie, contributing not only to the construction of *Africa Hall* in Addis Ababa (the permanent seat of the *United Nations Economic Commission for Africa*) but also to the expansion of *Addis Ababa-Bole Airport*. His family history is closely intertwined with governance dynamics and the upheaval of the 1974 *coup d'état* by the Derg, which led to their relocation to Yemen until 1990. The international academic exchange took place through his participation in conferences at both

national and international levels, involving interactions with esteemed organizations such as the *Royal African Society*. These conferences provided a platform for the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and collaborative projects with fellow scholars on a global scale. They offered the opportunity to gain insights from diverse perspectives, foster international cooperation, and stay updated on the latest developments within the field. Furthermore, through collaborative engagements in conferences with international research groups, the candidate seized the opportunity to refine his methodological approach and cultivate new skills within the aforementioned research domains. This collaborative approach proved instrumental in facilitating a comprehensive, current, and innovative analysis of historical and political events. It effectively melded scholarly rigor with firsthand exposure to various cultures, social structures, and political dynamics, thereby offering a multifaceted comprehension of the research topic.

- 3. Multidisciplinary Approach:** the research employs a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach, drawing insights from various fields including history, politics, anthropology, and sociology. This comprehensive approach allows for a holistic examination of the research topic from multiple vantage points, enriching both the depth and breadth of the analysis. The *maieutic method* develops tools that enable students to deeply engage with their motivation and gradually progress in their learning and personal growth journey. The social component emphasizes the awareness that learning is always a collaborative and shared endeavour. The method involves seeking stimuli, engaging in maieutic questioning, experiential laboratories, comprehension synthesis, and practical application, all within a flow of questions leading to an open-ended conclusion, paving the way for new avenues of exploration. The stimulus situation is identified through the analysis of case studies.

4. **Participation in Academic Conferences and teaching activities:** the researcher actively participates in academic conferences, both nationally and internationally, to stay updated on the latest research trends, share insights, and engage in academic discourse. These conferences provide valuable networking opportunities and contribute to the researcher's knowledge base. The research places the Ethiopian context within a broader global perspective, considering international academic conferences, collaborative research initiatives, and engagement with scholars and institutions worldwide. This global perspective enriches the analysis by providing comparative insights and a wider framework for understanding Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia.
  
5. **Memory Studies:** the research acknowledges the significance of memory in shaping individuals' and communities' sense of belonging and identity. *Memory studies*<sup>302</sup> are used to explore how memory and reconstructed memory particularly autobiographical memory, has influenced the post-colonial reconstruction of historical narratives, fostering a sense of community and belonging.
  
6. **Epistemological Considerations:** the research incorporates epistemological considerations that recognize the subjectivity inherent in perspectives and the social construction of political and economic realities. It critically evaluates the ontology of reality and the role of personal interpretations in shaping historical narratives. The epistemological perspective adopted here is social, emphasizing an approach that helps readers understand the political and economic construction from a social dimension. These events are social phenomena characterized by a consensus but not absolute in their

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<sup>302</sup> Gathogo, J. (January 13, 2021). *Memories and history: Oral history and tradition in East Africa context*. In Contexts, Sources and Critical-Historical Methods for The Research of Religion, four months specialization course conducted by Fondazione per le Scienze Religiose Giovanni XXIII/FSCIRE (Bologna/Palermo).

nature; they carry the weight of perspective rather than objective reality. A proficient doctoral researcher is, first and foremost, a skilled methodologist. They possess a deep understanding of various research methods and epistemological positions. In the words of Waltz, a good doctoral researcher is a philosopher of science who revisits perspectives within the academic discourse. This applies to the origins of science and its application to the social sciences, delving into the epistemology of the social sciences. Within the disciplinary field of African history and institutions, the researcher must position themselves within the existing discipline, familiarizing themselves with the classics of the field and the foundational works that shape the discipline's foundations.

In conclusion, the methodology employed in this PhD thesis combines traditional historical research methods with contemporary digital tools and a multidisciplinary perspective. It also recognizes the importance of memory studies, global engagement, and epistemological considerations to provide a comprehensive analysis of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia, particularly in the context of slavery and its historical legacy. This research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of this relationship and its implications for contemporary Ethiopian society.

