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Religion, Peace and Conflict in Contemporary Africa

Guest Editors

Meron Zeleke and George Klute

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The journal will cover the wide range of religious traditions that were founded, were or are found, and exist and operate in Africa and the African Diaspora; and topics useful to scholars involved in the academic study of religions in Africa and the Africa Diaspora, and to a wider readership of academics in the general study of religions.

The journal shall be published as electronic issues only, with up to two (2) issues per year. It will be administered on behalf of the AASR by the Editorial Management Board and the International Advisory Board.



ABOUT THE AASR

The African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR) is an academic association that promotes the study of religions in Africa through international collaboration in research, publishing, and teaching. AASR was founded in 1992 in Harare, Zimbabwe at a Regional Conference of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR). The AASR has been an affiliate organization of the IAHR since 1995.

In particular, the AASR aims to stimulate the academic study of religions in Africa in the following ways:

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Editor's Note

It gives me great pleasure to introduce and welcome readers to this *Special Issue 3.1* 'Religion, Peace and Conflict in Contemporary Africa,' anchored by our guest editors, Meron Zeleke and George Klute. The peer-reviewed papers that make up this issue were drawn from the international conference "*Religion, Peace and Conflict in Contemporary Africa*" (sponsored under the Volkswagen Stiftung Founding Initiative: Knowledge for Tomorrow Cooperative Research Project) held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in May 2016.

I am delighted that the project research findings shared by the contributors and the robust conversation that took place during this event, to which I was invited as keynote speaker, could be further documented and disseminated. As this is the first Special Issue since the inauguration of the AASR E-Journal, permit me to congratulate both the guest editors and contributors for blazing the trail in this regard. May I also use this medium to encourage colleagues to consider submitting very informing batch of essays, such as these ones for consideration. This forum will continue to create the needed space and opportunity for disseminating African and African diaspora-centred research findings.

My profound thanks once more to our guest editors and authors for enriching and further nuancing the discourse on religion, peace and conflict in contemporary Africa with their research and findings.

I hope that our avid readers will find these rich essays rewarding.

Afe Adogame
Editor-In-Chief
October 2017

Guest Editor's Note

This special issue entitled Religion, Peace and Conflict in Contemporary Africa is a collection of selected papers presented at the international conference *Religion, Peace and Conflict in Contemporary Africa* held in Addis Ababa Ethiopia on May 14-15, 2016. This conference is part of a postdoctoral project funded under the Volkswagen Stiftung Founding Initiative: Knowledge for Tomorrow Cooperative Research Projects in Sub-Saharan Africa Postdoctoral Fellowships in the Humanities in Sub-Saharan and North Africa

The selected papers in this special issue clearly demonstrates that the role of religion in conflict should be depicted in binary terms: as a source of conflict and/or as a source of reconciliation. The editors of this special issue argue that starting from the premise that religion is the cause of most conflicts in the contemporary world leads to oversimplification and obscuring the complexity. Establishing a clear-cut model or theory for understanding the relationship between religion, on the one hand, and violence or peace, on the other hand, as it can be inferred from the papers included in this special issue is quite problematic. Religion can play a significant role in preventing and solving conflict. Thus the complex interplay between religion and conflict/peace needs to be addressed and analysed in individual contexts. Furthermore, there is a need to problematise tensions and conflicts often framed as 'religious'. Often wars that are considered 'religious conflicts' have social, economic or political roots as the case study from South Sudan presented in this special issue clearly shows. Likewise the paper focusing on the jihad discourse in Kenya accents how the jihad cause is rationalised in the present ethno-nationalist Somali showing the complex and layered nature of the tension. This duly calls for the need to consider what other explanations, religious or political leaders draw on beyond the religious discourse, symbolism or institutions as a way of justifying violence. Each tenuous and conflictual case has to be unpacked on an individual basis in order to understand the complexity of the phenomenon that is otherwise labelled as a religious conflict, and to get a comprehensive understanding of the multiple factors leading to a particular conflict.

Furthermore, analysis of conflicts over time by adopting a diachronic approach, can help us to understand the underlying issues. These might not necessarily relate to religious differences but rather to politico-economic issues. We also need to consider that tensions and conflicts within a religious community can affect conflict between religious communities. This is a topic that is often ignored in the literature on religious conflict, because social cohesion within the religious communities is taken for granted. The papers focusing on the Tehadiso movement within the EOTC (Ethiopian orthodox Tewahido Church) contribute to filling this gap in the academic discourse. Furthermore the case studies from Ghana and Zimbabwe probed into these and more complex patterns and interwoven causes for religious based discontent in different cultural contexts in Africa. Taking cases of religious based tensions from different parts of the continent and from different religious groups, the contributions examined how religious based tensions and conflicts have evolved in a particular social, economic, and political *milieux*.

Moreover, the papers addressed the local, regional and transnational dimensions of religious based conflicts by paying attention to the factors and the groups involved in the conflicts. Some of the papers further investigated the profile of the actors involved, their internal composition, interests and power positions. This can be best inferred from the paper focusing on the Coptic Church in Egypt which explores the concept of intellectual humility in the context of religious and communal leadership within the Coptic Orthodox Church. The other paper addressing the role of different actors, power positions and mobilisation strategies in religious based conflicts is the contribution focusing on the Ahbash religious groups in Ethiopia. Mobilisation bases of the actors and the appropriation of the new media in the process of mobilisation and information sharing in conflict situations is another theme that the paper on Nigeria elucidates. One of the selected papers addressed the role of religion in peace building drawing on an empirical study of a religious approach for peace making among the Siltie People in Southern Ethiopia. The contribution of the holy water healing in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church presents how religious deliberations offers a solution to the misery and suffering of the afflicted.

Hence, the selected papers included in this special issue address a wide spectrum of themes ranging from aspects of interaction and tension between religious groups, factors accounting for the rise of religious based conflicts, intergenerational tensions within religious institutions, the significance of social media for religious polemics and in religious based conflicts and faith based initiatives of dispute/ conflict settlement. The paper on religious institutions of conflict resolution takes a positive approach addressing the role of religious leaders and ideas in conflict prevention and resolution.

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The Rise of Jihad, Killing of ‘Apostate Imams’ and Non-Combatant Christian Civilians in Kenya: Al-Shabaab’s Re-Definition of the Enemy on Religious Lines

Hassan Juma Ndzovu¹

Abstract

Since the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) deployment into Somalia in 2011, terrorist related attacks have increased targeting anti-jihadi Muslim clerics, churches and non-combatant Christian civilians. These and other attacks indicated the rise of a homegrown radicalised section of the Muslim population in Kenya, willing to undertake jihad and kill fellow citizens in the name of Islam. In this regard, the article explores the intra-Muslims conflict emanating due to divergent views on the concept of jihad, and how ultimately the variances are supposedly resolved by imposing the apostasy claim on the opposing clerics. In varied occasions, suspected al-Shabaab militants and their Kenya jihadist counterparts have attacked churches, and killed non-combatant Christian civilians. The atrocious killing of both anti-jihadi Muslim clerics and non-combatant Christian civilians, and coupled with the exclusivist jihadi supported discourse imply the conflict is transforming into a broad-based violence between Muslims and non-Muslims. Therefore, this paper identifies three arguments associated with the jihad discourse in Kenya; (i) rationalising the jihad cause in the present ethno-nationalist Somali war; (ii) the apostasy claim arising due to intra-Muslims conflict boosted by the jihad discourse; and (iii) the justification of targeting non-combatant Christian civilians during the ‘jihad’ attacks.

KEY WORDS: Al-shabaab, Islam, Jihad, Islamist, Non-Muslim, Kenya

Introduction

We will talk about jihad. We believe in jihad. It is jihad, jihad is part of our religion. They will kill us all, we will die but we will never leave jihad.²

¹ Hassan is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Moi University. Email: ndzovuhassan@hotmail.com.

² Sheikh Abubakar Shariff Ahmed (Makaburi), see the video “Jihad in Kenya”, Vice News, 2014. Accessed on February 25, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcwokHau8Xk>.

These are the words of Sheikh Abubakar Shariff Ahmed also popularly known as ‘Makaburi.’ The visibly furious Sheikh ‘Makaburi’ was recorded on camera declaring this view when he visited the murder scene of Sheikh Ibrahim ‘Rogo’ Omar.³ The murdered Sheikh Omar was allegedly assassinated by security agents on suspicion of preaching jihad and organising attacks on anti-jihad imams and non-Muslim civilians. Since 2011, various incidents of attacks attributed to the radical Islamist jihadi groups had been on the rise in Kenya suggesting a jihad tendency being rife in the country. Previously, Kenya has witnessed terrorist onslaughts like the Israel owned Norfolk hotel attack in 1980; the US embassy assault in 1998; and the 2002 twin attacks of the Paradise hotel and an Israel jet taking off from Mombasa international airport.⁴ However, these earlier terror attacks were attributed to international Muslim groups like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and al-Qaeda, ruling out the possibility of the local Muslims’ involvement. But since the KDF deployment into Somalia in 2011, in pursuit of al-Shabaab, terrorist related attacks have increased targeting anti-jihadi Muslim clerics, churches and non-combatant Christian civilians. Some of the major assaults included; the Westgate mall in 2013⁵; Mpeketoni in June 2014⁶; Mandera Bus and Quarry killings in November 2014 and December 2014 respectively⁷; and the Garissa University College bloodshed in 2015.⁸ With these and other attacks it indicated the rise of a homegrown radicalised section of the Muslim population in Kenya, willing to undertake jihadi and kill fellow citizens to fulfill an ‘Islamic cause.’

Reports have shown a trend of sections of Muslims joining jihadi groups and overzealously advance the movements’ jihadi ideology posing danger in the country. Due to the variant shades of the jihadi groups (al-Hijra, Jaysh Ayman and al-Muhajiroun), and which sometimes operate independently of the al-Shabaab, in this article I would, sometime collectively, refer to them as the ‘Kenya Islamist jihadi.’ Between December 2013 and November 2014, Muslim youths sympathetic to the jihad cause took control of certain mosques in Mombasa to serve as centres for preaching and spreading its ideology.⁹ In between the contestation for the mosque space, Muslim clerics opposing the preaching of the violent jihad ideology were killed under mysterious circumstances. Arguably, there is effort to intimidate and kill the anti-jihadi clerics opposing the growing jihadi propensity among the Muslim community. In this regard, the article will explore the intra-Muslim conflict generated by the diverse views on the concept of jihad and how ultimately the divergences are supposedly resolved by imposing the apostasy claim on the opposing clerics.

To the wider Kenyan society, the appearance of the Islamist jihadi groups in the country has caused anxiety among citizens. In varied occasions, suspected al-Shabaab

³ See the video Jihad in Kenya, Vice News, 2014.

⁴ Hassan J. Ndzovu, (2014). *Muslims in Kenyan Politics: Political Involvement, Marginalization and Minority Status*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

⁵ Rob Bleaney, (2013). “Nairobi terrorist attacks: Live updates as Kenyan forces mount gun battle to end shopping mall crisis” *Mirror* September 23. Accessed on February 25th, 2016: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/nairobi-terrorist-attacks-live-updates-2294469>.

⁶ Hassan Mwakimako and Justin Willis, (2014). “Islam, Politics and Violence on the Kenyan Coast”, July 2014, pp1-26. *Observatory Analysis on Political and Security Issues in the Horn of Africa*

⁷ Nzau Musau, (2014). “Smell of death still evident in targeted bus” *The Standard*, Monday, November 24, p6.

⁸ Fred Mukinda and Aggrey Mutambo, (2015). “147 Students killed in cold-blooded raid on campus” *Daily Nation*, Friday, April 3, pp4-5.

⁹ Ishaq Jumbe and Patrick Beja, (2013). “Mombasa Imams alarmed as radicalized Muslim youth take over popular mosques, police fear moving in might anger even moderate faithful”, *The Standard*, Tuesday, December 3.

militants and their Kenya co-jihadist counterpart have attacked churches, and killed non-combatant Christian civilians.¹⁰ Following Kenya's forces deployment to Somalia, the al-Shabaab's struggle has taken on a fresh dimension with the violence extended against non-combatant Christian civilians, reflecting a new wave of conflict in the country. The atrocious killing of some church clergies and non-combatant Christian civilians, attacks against churches and coupled with the exclusivist jihad supported discourse imply the conflict is transforming into a broad-based violence between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Therefore, in this article I examine how al-Shabaab and the Kenya Islamist jihadi re-defines the 'enemy' along religious lines by identifying three arguments; (i) the rationalising of the jihad cause in the present ethno-nationalist Somali war; (ii) the apostasy claim arising due to intra-Muslims conflict attributed to the jihad discourse; (iii) and the justification of targeting non-combatant Christian civilians. The last two aspects of my discussion are informed by the expansion of the jihadi's violence to civilians who embody the enemy apostates and unbelievers. The re-definition of the enemy along religious lines has provided the jihadi groups justification of extending the hostility to opposing Muslim clerics and increasing victimisation of Christian civilians. In this warfare approach, both opposing Muslim clerics and non-combatant Christian civilians are no longer secure as violence is directed against them. Undoubtedly, al-Shabaab's repositioning of the conflict within the transnational Islamic framework is an effort to lift its profile in the global Islamist jihadi circles. From an ethno-nationalist struggle, the al-Shabaab led war in Somalia has now transformed into a "glocalised jihad that is inspired by global forces but which is focused on local injustices."¹¹

The 'Circle of Obligation' Discourse: Rationalising 'Nomadic Jihad' in the Contemporary Ethno-Nationalist Somali Struggle

In Kenya there are various Islamist jihadi groups operating in the country, and one of them is Jaysh Ayman. This group was purportedly formed in 2001 through the influence of jihadist clerics, Sheikh Aboud Rogo and Sheikh 'Makaburi.'¹² Though initially affiliated to the al-Shabaab, the group is reported to have recently declared loyalty to the Islamic state.¹³ While the al-Shabaab leadership has remained faithful to al-Qaeda, any shift of allegiance by its former allies has resulted in forceful retaliation by its security organ.¹⁴ Undoubtedly, Jaysh Ayman was originally established with the blessing of the al-Qaeda's leadership in the region thereby explaining the genesis of its name, the 'army of Ayman', the al-Qaeda emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri. With a limited number of foreign

¹⁰ Philip Mwakio and Benard Sanga, (2013). "Likoni church torched amid rising tension", *The Standard*, Saturday, December 28, p7; David Ochami, (2015). "Al-Shabaab releases chilling video about Mpeketoni attack", *The Standard*, Monday, March 9, p6.

¹¹ Virginie Andre, (2015). "Violent Jihad and Beheadings in the Land of Al Fatoni Darussalam", *Religions*, 6, p1205. Accessed at www.mdpi.com/journal/religions.

¹² David Ochami, (2015). "KDF scores major victory with last week's killing of Al-Shabaab militia" *The Standard*, Sunday, June 21, 2015, p20.

¹³ The Standard Team, (2016). "Fugitive Kenyan al-Shabaab terrorist resurfaces with more threats" *The Standard*, Sunday, February 28. Accessed December 28th, 2016: <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000193248/fugitive-kenyan-al-shabaab-terrorist-resurfaces-with-more-threats>.

¹⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, (2016). "American charged with supporting shabaab, serving in 'specialized fighting force'", January 11. Accessed on December 28, 2016: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/01/american-charged-with-supporting-shabaab-serving-in-specialized-fighting-force.php>.

fighters, Jaysh al-Ayman draws most of its members from the coastal cities of Kenya.¹⁵ In its operations, the group has been accused of numerous incidents of assaults that included a June 2014 Mpeketoni massacre¹⁶; a July 2014 attack in Hindi that culminated in the destruction of a church¹⁷; as well as a June 2015 ambush at a Kenya Defence Force base in Baure that led to the killing of two Kenyan soldiers.¹⁸

The other Islamist jihadi group is al-Hijra that begun as a Muslim Youth Centre (MYC) founded in Eastleigh in 2008 by Sheikh Ahmed Iman Ali. Later in January 2012, the al-Shabaab leadership appointed Sheikh Ali as emir for al-Shabaab's operations in Kenya, culminating in the changing of the name to al-Hijra. His selection indicated the recognition of non-Somalis as members of the al-Shabaab.¹⁹ Having declared allegiance to al-Shabaab, the group is implicated in a series of attacks in Nairobi as well as the recruitment of sections of Kenyan Muslims into al-Shabaab.²⁰ While Sheikh Rogo supported the activities of MYC in the country, his ambition differed from those of Sheikh Ali, since Rogo desired the creation of "an East African jihadist movement distinct from al-Shabaab."²¹ But with the death of Sheikh Rogo, al-Hijra's leaders quickly moved in to assure the al-Shabaab leadership of their continuing loyalty. Trained by al-Shabaab in Somalia, the members of al-Hijra are determined to extend the jihadi war to Kenya.²² Following his appointment, Sheikh Ali appealed to Kenyan Muslims to overcome their oppressive status by joining the jihadi movement to wage war against their 'enemy.'²³

Mostly, the al-Hijra attacks in Kenya have been on a small scale involving the tossing of grenades into bars, churches and placing of bombs in public buses. Despite al-Hijra's wish to instigate more destructive assaults, the group appears to lack the technical capability to plan complex attacks.²⁴ Notwithstanding the group's shortfall, it possible that its armed combatants were involved in the Westgate assault since the attackers were fluently speaking Kiswahili and also their supposedly disappearance from the mall, suggested their knowledge of the city. This clearly points to home grown members of the jihadi movement with formidable operational experience acquired due to battlefield exposure in Somalia.

Last, al-Muhajiroun in East Africa is another jihadist group in Kenya formed in January 2015, and which is believed to have made an irrevocable pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab.²⁵ Among its senior leaders include Sheikh Ali, the former leader

¹⁵ Ochami, "KDF scores major victory with last week's killing of Al-Shabaab militia."

¹⁶ The Standard Team, "Fugitive Kenyan al-Shabaab terrorist resurfaces with more threats."

¹⁷ Joscelyn, "American charged with supporting shabaab, serving in 'specialized fighting force.'"

¹⁸ Joscelyn, "American charged with supporting shabaab, serving in 'specialized fighting force.'"

¹⁹ Matt Bryden, (2015). "The Decline and Fall of Al-Shabaab?: Think again," SAHAN: Pathfinders in Policy and Practice, p8.

²⁰ Kat Nickerson, (2014). "Kenyan Terrorism Evolves: The Emergence of al-Hijra (Muslim Youth Center)." Accessed on December 28th, 2016: <https://katsafrica.wordpress.com/2014/06/01/kenyan-terrorism-evolves-the-emergence-of-al-hijra-muslim-youth-center/>.

²¹ Bryden, "The Decline and Fall of Al-Shabaab?: Think again," p8.

²² Bryden, "The Decline and Fall of Al-Shabaab?: Think again," p8.

²³ David M. Anderson, (2014). "Why Mpeketoni matters: al-Shabaab and violence in Kenya", *Norwegian Peace-building Resource Centre*, p2.

²⁴ Bryden, "The Decline and Fall of Al-Shabaab?: Think again," p8.

²⁵ Avraham Ben Adam, (2015). "Al-Muhajiroun: Al-Qaeda's New Branch in Kenya." Accessed on December 28th, 2016: <http://intelligencebriefs.com/al-muhajiroun-al-qaedas-new-branch-in-kenya/>.

of the MYC (al-Hijra), hence explaining the choice of Kenya for its activities.²⁶ With Sheikh Ali in its leadership structure, it is possible that the new group incorporated the former al-Hijra movement,²⁷ which he earlier led. Though it is not clear what relationship exists between al-Shabaab and al-Muhajiroun, there is no doubt that the group was established to support the former's attempts at expanding in Kenya and the East African region.²⁸ Aware of the numerous challenges confronting al-Shabaab and which curtails its capability in successfully exporting the jihad ideology to the East Africa countries, the al-Qaeda leadership supported the creation of the new outfit.²⁹ Reports have hinted that al-Shabaab is considering leaving some of its operational activities in Kenya to al-Muhajiroun, making the group its official operative in the country.³⁰ Though initially affiliated to al-Shabaab, the group is expected to grow to an independent functional jihadi movement. The group comprises of "members of *ansar al-Mujahideen*" who have fought "alongside al-Shabaab's *Mujahideen* in Somalia as a separate, but cohesive unit made of foreign jihadists."³¹ Over the course of its jihadi war, the al-Shabaab leadership came to acknowledge and assent the immense contribution of foreign fighters in the war. Though situated in Kenya, the group is expected to spread the jihadi discourse within the entire East African region, and further strive to establish a Muslim society that conforms to the "strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic teachings."³²

Although most Muslim scholars unanimously agree that a defensive jihad is an obligation for Muslims, a section of the *ulama* in Kenya embrace the view that in the present period jihad should focus on the individual's struggle for inner purification (*jihad al-nafs*), which is the 'greater jihad.' This view point has been challenged by the jihadists' leadership hence encouraging participation in a jihadi war against the 'invading' forces of the AMISOM (Africa Mission in Somalia). Consequently, some of the pro-jihadi sheikhs' sermons and their Kiswahili publication (*Gaidi Mtaani* meaning terrorist in the neighbourhood) focuses on giving broad exhortations to jihadi, outlining the obligation and benefits of participation.³³

In both mosque sermons and magazine publications, jihadists argue against the popular Muslim opinion that jihad is mainly a struggle against ones individual soul. In advancing their argument, al-Shabaab rely on the opinions of various classical Muslim scholars to strengthen their justification for a jihadi cause. Like other Islamist jihadi groups in the Muslim world, al-Shabaab and their Kenya allies seem to have been

²⁶ Evgenia Gvozdeva, (2015). "Tanzania/Kenya: New Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group "Al-Muhajiroun in East Africa" issues threat against western targets." Accessed on December 28th, 2016: <http://www.esisc.org/publications/analyses/tanzaniakenya-new-al-qaeda-linked-terrorist-group-al-muhajiroun-in-east-africa-issues-threat-against-western-targets>, on 28th December, 2016.

²⁷ Fred Oluoch, (2015). "Security agents pursue new terrorist group in the East Africa region", *The East African, Saturday*, April 25. Accessed on December 28th, 2016: <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/Security-agents-pursue-new-terrorist-group-in-East-Africa/2558-2696970-mas8l0z/index.html>.

²⁸ Gvozdeva, "Tanzania/Kenya: New Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group "Al-Muhajiroun in East Africa" issues threat against western targets."

²⁹ Adam, "Al-Muhajiroun: Al-Qaeda's New Branch in Kenya."

³⁰ Gvozdeva, "Tanzania/Kenya: New Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group "Al-Muhajiroun in East Africa" issues threat against western targets."

³¹ Adam, "Al-Muhajiroun: Al-Qaeda's New Branch in Kenya."

³² Avraham Ben Adam, (2015). "Al-Muhajiroun: Al-Qaeda's New Branch in Kenya." Accessed on December 28th, 2016: <http://intelligencebriefs.com/al-muhajiroun-al-qaedas-new-branch-in-kenya/>

³³ Abu Hussein, "Maswala Muhimu Kuhusiana na Jihad Somalia", *Gaidi Mtaani*, Issue 3, Rabi Al-Thani 1434, p7. The translation from Kiswahili to English is mine.

influenced by the work of Ibn Taymiyya. Having initiated the ‘circle of obligation’ idea with regard to jihadi, Ibn Taymiyya argues:

When an enemy attacks a Muslim community, then it is the obligation of those who have been attacked to fight to defend their city and get rid of the enemy. And even for those Muslims whom the attack was not intended, it is their obligation to help their Muslim brethren as Allah said, “But if they seek your aid in religion, it is your duty to help them” (8:72). The Prophet has also commanded about Muslims assisting one other.”³⁴

In expounding Ibn Taymiyya’s argument, al-Shabaab demonstrates that his idea is applicable in present Somalia, where a force of ‘infidels’ has invaded a Muslim *wilayat*, declaring:

Currently our Muslim brothers in Somalia need our assistance because they have been over powered by the infidels. Therefore, it is the duty of all Muslims to heed their call for help...any Muslim country, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Somalia, which for now have been invaded by various enemies, it is our responsibility as Muslims to help them in their liberation struggle.³⁵

To advance the ‘defensive jihad’ cause, al-Shabaab further rely on legal opinions issued by Muslim scholars belonging to the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence (Hanafi, Maliki, Shaafi and Hanbali), whose rulings they maintain to be in agreement with regard to the subject.³⁶ Therefore, in contextualising the views of the four schools to the Somalia situation, al-Shabaab claims:

...the invasion of Somalia calls for Muslims in that country to stand up and defend their country, but if they are unable to defend themselves, it is the duty of those Muslims living near them i.e. Kenya and those in other nearby countries to assist them. Similarly, if the Muslims in the immediate circle are unable to liberate the invaded Muslim country (Read Somalia), then this ‘circle of obligation’ expands until it eventually becomes the duty of the entire Muslim community in the world in providing the required assistance.³⁷

Supporting al-Shabaab’s struggle are sermons of Kenya Islamist jihadi clerics sympathetic to the jihadi cause, the most vocal one being Sheikh Rogo, who was consistent in his call for jihadi in Somalia.³⁸ He was the most important religious figure in Kenya to revive active participation in ‘defensive jihad’ in the context of Somalia. In a kind of Islamic liberation theology, Rogo appealed to the Muslims in Kenya “to take up arms” as it guaranteed the establishment of the rule of God in both Somalia and Kenya.³⁹ In Rogo’s argument, the application of force is necessary to remove oppression and

³⁴ Abu Hussein, “Maswala Muhimu Kuhusiana na Jihad Somalia”, p7.

³⁵ Abu Hussein, “Maswala Muhimu Kuhusiana na Jihad Somalia”, p8.

³⁶ Abu Hussein, “Maswala Muhimu Kuhusiana na Jihad Somalia”, p8.

³⁷ Abu Hussein, “Maswala Muhimu Kuhusiana na Jihad Somalia”, p8.

³⁸ Press Office, “Sheikh Aboud Rogo’s Death: A Catalyst for Change”, *Gaidi Mtaani*, Issue 3, Rabi Al-Thani 1434, p5.

³⁹ Sheikh Aboud Rogo’s view expressed in the video, “Mpeketoni: Reclaiming back Muslim lands under Kenya Occupation”, Al-Kataib Production, 2014.

enable the Islamic faith to predominate the world. In his several sermons, he maintained that Muslims are today in a state of misfortune because of their abandonment of jihadi.⁴⁰

Sheikh Rogo together with other Islamist jihadi clerics adopted Ibn Taymiyya's and other classical imam's reasoning, arguing that if a group of Muslims are unable to repel an aggressor, then it becomes an individual obligation for those nearest the conflict zone.⁴¹ Consequently, the presence of the KDF in Somalia provided the excuse Rogo and other jihadi sheikhs needed to frame Kenya as an occupying force thereby justifying a defensive jihad. The 'defensive argument' was necessary to legitimise attacks against non-Muslims, which through selective texts and concepts was presented as religiously justified violence against the infidels. Therefore, the attacks on fellow Christian citizens by the members of jihadi groups were interpreted as retaliation against injustices of the Kenyan government, which have instigated rage in the form of religious intolerance.

'Hypocrite' and 'Apostate Imam' Claim: A Strategy to Resolve Intra-Muslim Conflicts

The public debate on whether the war in Somalia is jihad or not, has generated intra-Muslims conflict due to the emergent diverse views. Ultimately, the intra-Muslims conflict has seen the assassination of several Muslim clerics, from both the opposing side. While the killing of the pro-jihadi Muslim clerics was blamed on the Kenyan security forces, that of the anti-jihadi imams was attributed to the jihadist combatants. Within the pro-jihadi camp it began with the assassination of Sheikh Rogo in August 2012. As the main ideological leader, he was regarded as the pathway to Islamic radicalisation and recruitment of Muslims for deployment in Somalia.⁴² In October 2013, his successor, Sheikh Ibrahim 'Rogo' Omar, was killed by unknown assailants. Curiously, he was eliminated in a similar manner and along the same road his predecessor met his death.⁴³ And while attending a court hearing situated on the same road his two colleagues were assassinated, Sheikh 'Makaburi' was killed by unidentified gunmen outside the court premises.⁴⁴ His assassination sealed the fate of the three comrades accused of advancing the jihadi cause in Kenya. The murder of the pro-jihadi clerics has been blamed on the state's security agents through the alleged support of the anti-jihadi clerics as efforts of combating religious radicalisation.

Perceived as a way of retaliation, al-Shabaab and their Kenya allies embarked on a campaign that targeted a systematic elimination of the anti-jihadi clerics. Sheikh Said Salim Mwasalamu became the first target, killed by unknown gunmen in December

⁴⁰ See the video, "Mpeketoni: Reclaiming back Muslim lands under Kenya Occupation"; Sheikh Aboud Rogo sermon, "Ulazima wa Kupigana na Mayahudi na Wakristo", Video, Ahlul-Kahf, 2012.

⁴¹ See the video, "Mpeketoni: Reclaiming back Muslim lands under Kenya Occupation."

⁴² Bill Roggio, (2012). "Kenyan Muslims riot after murder of Shabaab-linked cleric", *The Long War Journal*, August 28. Accessed on February 26, 2016: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/kenyan_muslims_riot.php.

⁴³ Galgalo Bocha, (2013). "Mombasa: 4 killed Aboud Rogo style", *Daily Nation*, Friday, October 4. Accessed on February 26, 2016: <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Sheikh-Abubakar-Sheriff-alias-Makaburi-/-/1056/2018322/-/1voake/-/index.html>.

⁴⁴ Benard Sanga and Stanley Mwachanga, (2014). "Radical cleric Sheikh Abubakar Shariff alias Makaburi shot dead", *The Standard*, Wednesday, April 2. Accessed on February 26, 2016: <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000108386/radical-cleric-sheikh-abubakar-shariff-alias-makaburi-shot-dead>.

2013.⁴⁵ His assassination was followed by the killing of Sheikh Mohamed Idris, Chairman of the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), on June 2014.⁴⁶ Five months later, Sheikh Salim Bakari Mwaragi was killed in manner comparable to Idris.⁴⁷ All these clerics were vocal critics of the jihadi ideology. They were accused of “betraying” Muslims by “supporting” the government’s security agencies in “eliminating” the Kenya’s jihadi clerics.⁴⁸

What could have influenced the killing of the anti-jihadi Muslim clerics? Disagreements among Muslims as to whether the fighting in Somalia could be designated as jihad or not, could have contributed to the deaths of several anti-jihadi Muslim clerics in the country. The opposing clerics view al-Shabaab as not legitimately involved in jihad warfare. This critique is informed by the perception that al-Shabaab violates all stipulated rules for engaging in jihad.⁴⁹ They are concerned that the commandment offering protection to women and children has blatantly been disregarded in the violent campaigns of al-Shabaab, and instead the region is witnessing the appearance of “violence without limitation or rules like those that shaped the concepts of just war and jihad.”⁵⁰

Due to ideological differences, Sheikh ‘Makaburi’ allegedly ordered the killings of the anti-jihadi clerics, accusing them of deserting the just cause of Islam (read jihad). Investigations revealed that ‘Makaburi’ purportedly conspired to execute the anti-jihadi imams after coordinating their expulsion from certain mosques in Mombasa.⁵¹ Clearly, there is division within the Kenyan Muslim community; anti-jihadi and pro-jihadi camps. Significantly, the division should not be understood as equally large groups, but rather the jihadists represent a small faction, while the anti-jihadi is a diverse and non-coherent block. What justification do the Islamist jihadi groups have to kill fellow Muslims in Kenya? Arguably, for Muslims to be fought by their co-religionists they should be declared to have left the Islamic faith (*murtadin*). In this regard, according to the jihadi groups, apostates should be fought without hesitation for forsaking Islam.⁵²

However, the majority of Muslims are reluctant in their approach to declaring a fellow Muslim apostate. This reluctance is underscored by various *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad, which include: “Withhold [your tongues] from those who say “There is no god but Allah”, do not call them *kafir*. Whoever calls a reciter of “There is no god but

⁴⁵ “Muslim leaders want arrest of clerics’ killers”, *Coast this week*, January 3-9 2014, issue 86, p2; Calvin Onsarigo and Alloys Musyoka, (2013). “Muslim youth attack Mombasa sheikh”, *Weekend Star*, December 28/29, p6.

⁴⁶ Cyrus Ombati, (2014). “Gunmen kill chairman of Council of Imam and Preachers of Kenya Mohamed Idris”, *The Standard*, Tuesday, June 10. Accessed on February 26, 2016: <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000124224/gunmen-kill-chairman-of-council-of-imam-and-preachers-of-kenya-mohammed-idris>.

⁴⁷ Benard Sanga, (2014). “Battle between radical, moderate Muslims fuelled tension”, *The Standard*, Sunday, December 14, p26.

⁴⁸ Athman Amran, (2014). “Terror police investigating 6 individuals”, *Coast This Week*, January 3-9, Issue 86, p4.

⁴⁹ See Sheikh Juma Ngao’s interview in “Jihad in Kenya”.

⁵⁰ John O. Voll, (2015). “Boko Haram: Religion and Violence in the 21st Century”, *Religions*, 6, p1192. Accessed at www.mdpi.com/journal/religions.

⁵¹ David Ochami, (2015). “Cables claim Makaburi plotted to kill preachers”, *The Standard*, Saturday, March 7, p6.

⁵² Abu Hussein, “Maswala Muhimu Kuhusiana na Jihad Somalia”, p7.

Allah” as a *kaafir*, is nearer to being a *kaafir* himself.”⁵³ This cautionary measure from Muhammad’s tradition suggests that apostasy accusation requires absolute proof of intention, something that is impossible unless the individual openly announces his disbelief. In line with this view, none of the murdered anti-jihad clerics had publicly denounced Islam since they were still prominent religious personalities in their communities by the time of their slaying. But despite the lack of evidence to have renounced Islam, they were considered hypocrites and apostates by association.

For the Kenya jihadists, ‘supporting’ the government against religious radicalisation of sections of Muslims is considered apostasy. This claim became enough confirmation in charging the anti-jihadi clerics with apostasy. The anti-jihadi clerics’ opposition to the jihadi’s ideology and their willingness to support the state in curbing radicalisation within the Muslim community was interpreted by the jihadi groups as an attack on the Islamic cause. The theological basis for severing relations with ‘infidel’ states is obtained in Quran 5:51, declaring, “O you who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for your friends and protectors [*awliya*]; they are but friends and protectors to each other.” In developing a broader definition of the term “*wali*” (pl. *Awaliya*), the jihadist included “any relationship with non-Muslims.”⁵⁴ As a result any form of support to the Kenyan government by the anti-jihadi clerics in countering the ideology of the jihadists was considered as apostasy, thereby a justifiable reason for their elimination. Consequently, Muslims who work together with the government and openly condemn the activities of the jihadi groups are branded as *munafiq* (hypocrites) who deserve to be chastised for their betrayal against the faith. An emphasis is made on their Islamic identity forbidding them from associating with other groups, especially the *kaafir* government. Those who failed to abide by this have been killed as seen with the case of anti-jihadi clerics on the pretext of apostasy.

‘Doctrine of Proportional Response’ and the Killing of Non-Combatant Christian Civilians

To the broader Kenyan society, Muslims affiliated to the jihadi groups in the country have caused apprehension among citizens. In September 2013, a small band of jihadist fighters attacked the Westgate mall in Nairobi and by the end of an 80 hour siege at least 67 people were killed.⁵⁵ Suspected jihadi members, in February 2014, killed a pastor of a Christian church in Mombasa (Majengo area). A month later, two gunmen raided Jesus Joy Church in Mombasa (Likoni area), killing seven people and injuring several others.⁵⁶ In June 2014, more than 60 people were killed during the Mpeketoni attack in Lamu, allegedly committed by Jaysh al-Ayman.⁵⁷ In December 2014, 64 people were executed within a week in Mandera, targeting non-Muslims living in the region. The victims included 28 passengers who were pulled off a bus,⁵⁸ and 36 quarry workers who were

⁵³ Quinton Wiktorowicz, (2006). “A Genealogy of Radical Islam”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 28, p77.

⁵⁴ Wiktorowicz, “A Genealogy of Radical Islam”, p82.

⁵⁵ Daniel Howden, (2013). “Terror in Westgate mall: the full story of the attacks that devastated Kenya”, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2013/oct/04/westgate-mall-attacks-kenya-terror#undefined>.

⁵⁶ Sanga, “Battle between radical, moderate Muslims fuelled tension”, p26.

⁵⁷ David Ochami, (2015). “KDF scores major victory with last week’s killing of Al-Shabaab militia” *The Standard*, Sunday, June 21, p20.

⁵⁸ Kipkoech Tanui, (2014). “How to beat terrorists in their game”, *The Standard*, Friday, November 29, p15.

gruesomely killed because they were not Muslims.⁵⁹ And in April 2015, at least 147 people, mostly students, were killed in one of the deadliest assaults by the jihadists at Garissa University College in Northeastern Kenya.⁶⁰ Like in Westgate, Mpeketoni and Mandera attacks, at the Garissa University College non-Muslims were also a special target singled out for murder.

In all the attacks, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility justifying these horrendous killings as a reaction to “Kenyan occupation of Muslim land [read Somalia]” and “continued suffering of Muslims in Mombasa.”⁶¹ Clearly, the perpetrators of these horrible acts have not been afraid in indicating that they are fighting for Islam and Muslims thereby raising the key question of the religious motivation behind the attacks. There is no doubt that these attacks have raised religious tension in the country because of the profiling of non-Muslims for targeted murder, whether in public or in places of worship. Ironically, the continued declaration by jihadi groups’ leadership to be on a “religious mission against members of other faiths,” is eroding the public trust of “Islam as a religion of peace.”⁶²

However, aware of the negative image the attacks give to the Islamic faith, several anti-jihadi imams denounced the indiscriminate killings of non-Muslims civilians. The opposing clerics were dismayed by the jihadi groups’ ‘lack’ of religious justification for their attacks. According to one of the opposing imams, Hassan Suleiman Mohammed reiterated that “Islam does not advocate for shedding of innocent blood. Islam advocates for peace and coexistence.”⁶³ Similar views were echoed by Sheikh Mohammed Osman Warfa who was reported affirming, “We reiterate that their [jihadists] actions are unacceptable, immoral and inconsistent with Islamic teachings. Islam stands for peaceful co-existence and there is no reason whatsoever to justify the killing of innocent people.”⁶⁴ On his part, the chairman of the Kenya Muslim National Advisory Council (KEMNAC), Sheikh Juma Ngao added his voice proclaiming, “If they [al-shabaab and Kenya Islamist jihadi] want to kill, they should kill in their name and not in the name of God. And they should stop involving Islam and Muslims in their killings of innocent people in this country.”⁶⁵

Together with clerics of similar views they repeatedly emphasised that there is abundant religious evidence from primary sources of Islam prohibiting the killing of civilians. And the most widely cited source is the Quran 5:32, “We decreed for the children of Israel that whosoever kills a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind and who so saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind.” While a *hadith* of Muhammad supposedly condemning killing of non-combatant is the one declaring, “Set

⁵⁹ Manase Otsialo, (2014). “Massacre survivors recall night of horror”, *Daily Nation*, Thursday, December 4, p1.

⁶⁰ David Oginde, (2015). “We must confront the religious question in the war on terror”, *The Standard*, Monday, April 5, p3.

⁶¹ Martin Cuddihy, (2014). “Gunmen massacre 36 quarry workers while they sleep in north-east Kenya; President sacks minister, police chief”, December 3. Accessed on February 27, 2016: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-02/gunmen-slaughter-36-in-fresh-northeast-kenya-attack/5935012>.

⁶² David Oginde, (2014). “Muslim leaders may hold key to counter-terrorism bid”, *The Standard*, Sunday, November 30, p15.

⁶³ Joseph Akwiri, (2014). “Why the fight against radicalization will give rise to more resistance”, *Coast This Week*, January 3-9, Issue 86, p3.

⁶⁴ Adow Mohamed, (2014). “Suffering the consequences: Strategy of segregationist massacres catches dysfunctional security establishment off-guard”, *Weekend Star*, November 6/7, p2.

⁶⁵ See Sheikh Juma Ngao interview in “Jihad in Kenya”, Vice News, 2014.

out for jihad in the name of Allah and for the sake of Allah. Do not lay hands on the old verging on death, on women, children and babies” (*sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad).⁶⁶ These and other injunctions, the opposing clerics view them as doctrinal confirmation proscribing against intentional targeting of non-combatants. Clearly, the main focus of the anti-jihadi clerics seems to be a lack of justifiability of targeting non-combatant Christians in the al-Shabaab led war.

Despite doctrinal evidence emphasising the sanctity of life and limiting attacks against civilian, the jihadists still argued against non-combatant immunity. So where do the jihadi groups derive the justification of making civilians a legitimate target in Kenya? In al-Qaeda’s view, civilians who support an infidel or apostate state act as representatives of the enemy thereby becoming legitimate targets, and by extension include non-Muslims civilians.⁶⁷ As an affiliate of al-Qaeda in the East Africa region, Kenya’s jihadi groups embrace its ideology and apply it within the local context. In this respect, Christian civilians in Kenya were no longer viewed as non-combatants because they represented the oppressive government and a symbol of infidel in ‘Muslim land.’ This reasoning informs of the attacks against civil servants, university students, casual labourers, women and children based on their religious affiliation. The selective killing of non-Muslims implied they did not support the jihadi cause and were tacitly supporting the regime, thereby removing their non-combatant immunity. Clearly, the jihadists’ strategy is to create religious division among Kenyans, hence winning hearts of Muslims in its jihadi cause.

In addition, jihadi movements in the world employ the “doctrine of proportional response” in justifying killings against non-Muslim civilians. By drawing from this principle, the jihadists accept that, “when the infidels kill Muslims civilians it becomes permissible to attack their civilians in Kind.”⁶⁸ To justify their proportional response towards non-Muslims Kenyan citizens as a result of Kenya’s ‘incursion’ of Somali, al-Shabaab posited:

As the kuffar [read Kenya government] intentionally bombed and killed women and children in Mujahideen controlled areas of Somalia, the Mujahideen, justifiably, have the right to kill their women and children, and every action will be met with an appropriate response...⁶⁹

In advancing and elaborating the revenge narrative, Sheikh Makaburi was categorical positing:

In the Islamic Sharia we have revenge. The Kenya army is doing the same thing to people in Somalia. They are killing innocent civilians in Somalia...The Quran is very clear in this. It says in revenge there is life. If you don’t revenge they will continue killing. I will give you an example, after killing Sheikh Rogo no revenge was done that’s why they have killed Sheikh Ibrahim, and if there is no revenge done they will kill me or any other Sheikh.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Wiktorowicz, “A Genealogy of Radical Islam”, p84.

⁶⁷ Wiktorowicz, “A Genealogy of Radical Islam”, p88.

⁶⁸ Wiktorowicz, “A Genealogy of Radical Islam”, p89.

⁶⁹ “Was Badru Nairobi Operation a Cowardly Act?” *Gaidi Mtaani*, Issue 4, Dul Hijja, 1434, p20.

⁷⁰ See Sheikh Abubakar Shariff Ahmed interview in “Jihad in Kenya.” Sheikh Makaburi premonition came to be true as he was later on killed after the interview.

The revenge attack account and in similar proportion is presumably supported by the Quran 2:194, “And one who attacks you, attack him in like manner as he attacked you.” To justify the application of the doctrine of proportional response against non-Muslims, the jihadist groups had to demonstrate that the Kenya government is targeting Muslim civilians in Somalia and Kenya. It does so by citing the number of jihadi clerics killed in Kenya and civilian casualties in Somalia since the deployment of KDF. Without showing KDF’s intentional target of civilians, which is critical for the use of the proportionality doctrine, the jihadi groups concluded that the government has strategically killed Muslims in Somalia and Kenya to terrorise the Islamic nation. Accordingly, Muslims are permitted to kill infidel civilians as an act of reciprocity.

By declaring all Christians are culpable because of their ‘Christian government’ attack on Muslims, the jihadi groups have manipulated the subjective nature of defining ‘innocent civilians’ to justify wide-scale attacks on non-combatant Christian residents. In all their various onslaughts, the definition of ‘innocent civilian’ was redefined not to include the non-Muslim populations to sanction their killing, their capacity to fight notwithstanding. Clearly, the jihadists seem to argue that anyone assisting the enemy (the government) in whatever means in ‘fighting against Islam’ loses the protection of non-combatant status. But even without proving how the non-combatant Christian civilians have been supporting the state in fighting against the movement, the jihadi groups unilaterally declared their killing was doctrinally justified.

However, the targeting of innocent, non-combatant Christian civilians is merely a strategy rather than a doctrinal sanctioned practice. The decision of the leaders of the jihadi groups to kill non-combatant Christian civilians and attack their places of worship, could be seen as applying certain doctrinal texts to the wrong reality. The application of this principle of violence in classical Islam to fellow citizens who are a part of the same state lacks justification. The jihadi groups’ tactic of separating Muslims from Christians and thereafter killing the latter in their various attacks in Kenya was intended to create division between the members of the two faiths. The decision to kill non-combatant Christians was anticipated to provoke Christians to initiate reprisal attacks against Muslims. Had this occurred, the jihadists in Kenya would have claimed its goal is to defend Islam and the Muslims whose existence was being threatened. With such a claim they would have found their justification more appealing to the global jihadi.⁷¹

By re-defining the Kenya state as *kufir*, the jihadi groups have justifiable reasons to proclaim violent attack against the state. Through this process of re-identification of the enemy, Kenyan Christians are dehumanised and ultimately killed. “This process of satanization of the enemy is part of the construction of an image of cosmic war, which becomes particularly operational when people feel oppressed or have suffered injuries at the hands of the dominant”, Virginie Andre observed.⁷² The re-identification of the non-combatant Christian civilians as ‘infidel enemy’ stripes them of their worth as human beings whose killing is justifiable in attaining the jihadi’s goal. This strategy reflects an attitude, which perceives the identity of the enemy as illegitimate, undeserving of any respect. In this framework, violence against non-Muslim was legitimated in Islamic terms as jihad in the path of God. Religion defined an identity that opposed pluralism in favour of a clearly defined, exclusivist community.

⁷¹ Samuel Makinda, (2015). “How to cripple killer militia, which thrives on our weaknesses”, *The Standard*, Saturday, April 11, p4.

⁷² Andre, “Violent Jihad and Beheadings in the Land of Al Fatoni Darussalam”, p1207.

Conclusion

In Kenya, the aim of al-Shabaab and their Kenya allies' activities is to radicalise and unify the Muslim population behind its jihadi call in order to seize power in Somalia, which will culminate with the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in the region. By defining themselves in Islamist terms, the jihadists are striving to distance themselves from the secular premise of politics, with the objective of establishing an Islamic state devoid of infidels in its territory. The conflict propelled by jihadi groups revolves around the themes of defensive jihad, infidel, traitor, and apostasy. Thus, al-Shabaab regards itself as leading a defensive jihad, which they believe finds its justification in the forced 'incursion' by the infidel forces. Further, the jihadists have also expanded their violence to civilians who embody the enemy infidels and apostates. The cleverly usage of terminology indicates an ideological view in the way the jihadi groups frame the conflict. In their identification of the 'enemy', al-Shabaab describes them as 'infidels' and 'apostate.' This new framing has led to the evolution of the Somali civil war into a struggle to liberate a Muslim territory, which makes jihadi toward this cause compulsory to every Muslim. Al-Shabaab's usage of religion as the organising framework of their resistance, is gradually transforming the conflict into a cosmic war.

With its self-identification as a religious revolution, al-Shabaab finds selective doctrinal basis to legitimise religious violence on other groups. In its re-interpretation of the doctrinal texts, the jihadists focus on religious concepts helpful in the legitimisation and waging of a jihadi against non-Muslims. Together with the Kenyan jihadi groups, al-Shabaab draws on the Islamic tradition of war and the narratives of global jihadi in its justification and strategy for its armed struggle and violence against 'apostate imams' and non-Muslim civilians. The strategy's intention is to transform the conflict from ethno-nationalist to a cosmic war. The victims' religious affiliation is informative on the jihadists' re-identification process of the enemy. The jihadi groups have not only identified the state symbols and the Christian civilians as the *kufir* enemy that has to be vanquished, but also any Muslim who would be considered to be supporting the state in its war on terror. Clearly, jihadists are willing to kill anyone whom it does regard as both an apostate and infidel who in their interpretation loses their immunity status. Such an approach would give them an acceptable nod among the global jihadi.

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The Drum Wars: The Clash of Religious Groups in a Cosmopolitan City

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Abstract

Ghana has been lauded for its democratic credentials and stability since its successful implementation of multi-party democracy in 1992. In recent times, this image of stability has come under threat because of a conflict between the Ga traditionalists and some Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. Every year, the Ga Traditional Council impose a 30-day universal ban on drumming and all forms of noisemaking, in preparation for the *Homowo*, festival. On the one hand, the Ga traditionalists justify the noise ban as a time-honoured tradition and a constitutional right. On the other hand, Pentecostal-Charismatic churches generally refused to comply with the ban claiming it is an infringement on their right to freedom of worship. While both groups legitimise their claims with the national constitution, the disagreement between these two groups assumed violent proportions since 1998. The annual clashes have resulted in injuries to people and destruction to church property. Drawing on existing literature and ethnographic fieldwork in Accra and using Azar's (1990) Protracted Social Conflict theory, the focus of this paper is to understand why this conflict has persisted despite attempts by various agents to resolve it. I argue that there are several underlying factors that converge to protract this conflict.

KEYWORDS: Religious conflict; Religion and Sound; Protracted Social Conflict; Conflict in Africa.

Introduction

The religious landscape of Accra, the capital of Ghana like the entire nation shows a multiplicity of religions. This diversity of religions is promoted by the national constitution, which was adopted in 1992 after more than a decade of military rule. The legal framework specifically guarantees religious freedom and thereby prohibits the potential for any state religion. This effectively means the country is theoretically, a secular state but a religiously pluralised one with citizens practising several religions (Quashigah 1999). Despite the open religious market, Christianity, Islam and indigenous religions are the dominant religions and have a special status in Ghanaian society. Of the

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three main religions, Christianity is the religion of the majority of the people.² Among the different Christian denominations in the contemporary framework, the Pentecostal-Charismatic groups, which emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s are the most powerful and the least tolerant towards indigenous religions. The exponential growth of this strand of Christianity to date has tilted the religious equilibrium which existed in the country prior to the 1980s to their favour, being the most followed religious group today (Tsikata and Seini 2004: 41-42).³ The churches adopt a stature of complete rupture from indigenous beliefs expressed through a process of continuous stigmatisation and vilification of indigenous religions. This mentality clearly marks an end to the era of cooperation between indigenous religions and Christianity, which was ushered in by indigenous religion's ability to accommodate other religions and the mainline historical churches' approach to evangelisation usually referred to as *inculturation*⁴ and inter-religious dialogue.

The intolerance of the Pentecostal groups toward indigenous beliefs culminates in a very complex relationship between the two groups and this plays out in their everyday interactions in the city. This paper focuses on the *Homowo*⁵ festival, which I argue, is a microcosm of the broader relationship between the two parties. Although the Ga⁶ have several celebrations including twins' festivals, *Odwira* (yam festival), special naming and burial celebrations, the annual *Homowo* is the most important festival on the Ga traditional calendar. It is an agricultural festival celebrated to thank the gods and ancestors of the Ga people. *Homowo* serves as a reminder of the perseverance of their ancestors in the face of the dire famine that beset them in the past owing to the arid conditions of the Accra plains (Ozanne 1962). The *Homowo*, highlights the union of the Ga people both as a family unit and an ethnic group. It is a time when the Ga diaspora returns to its ancestral homes in the towns along the Accra coast to share a meal with their living relatives and ancestors. It is a time when family disputes are settled and ethnic solidarity is displayed in line with Emile Durkheim's notion of the integrative role of the traditional ritualistic gatherings (1995). Thus, the festival has historical, cultural and religious significance to the Ga. Accordingly, any impediment to the celebration of *Homowo* is viewed as an affront to the entire Ga ethnic group.

Even though the climax of the *Homowo* is in August and early September, the celebration begins in May. The celebrations move from one Ga town to another beginning with *Ga Mashie* (Central Accra). It commences with the planting of the corn and millet in a secluded field by the Ga high priests (*Wulomei*, singular *Wulomɔ*). After

² According to the 2010 population and housing census, 73.3% of the population is Christian whilst 17.0% and 4.9% of the citizens are professed Muslims and traditionalists respectively.

³ 29.6% of the national population profess to be adherents of the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches.

⁴ *Inculturation* here refers to what Chibueze Udeani defines as “the concept for the penetration and taking roots of the Christian message and the springing up of a Christian life in a way that accepts the uniqueness of the particular culture”. Add reference

⁵ *Homowo* literally means 'hooting at hunger' in the Ga language.

⁶ The Ga people are an ethnic group, the indigenes of the present day cosmopolitan city of Accra. Politically, the Ga people have a decentralised administration centred on seven major communities or towns namely Ga Mashie (Central Accra), Osu, La, Teshie, Nungua, Tema and Kpone. The seven Ga towns or settlements have independent and distinct leadership but with similar governance structures and customs. All these settlements can be found along the coast but every town owns other settlements further inland, which come together with the coastal towns to form present-day Accra. Every town has its principal priests (*Wulomei*) and chiefs (*Mantsemei*) but the three chief priests of Ga Mashie (Central Accra): Nai *Wulomɔ*, Sakumo *Wulomɔ* and Korle *Wulomɔ* are generally accepted as the three principal priests of the entire Ga state.

this comes the thirty-day ban on drumming and noisemaking within the traditional area. It is a time of quietude when all the Ga deities are believed to visit the towns to watch over the gestation of the planted grains. All noise is forbidden but particularly noise coming from drums is deemed to interfere with the ‘Ga universe’ as it makes the deities unhappy and deprives them of the needed peace to bless the plants. The thirty-day ban is followed by the lifting of the ban from one town to another beginning with *Ga Mashie*. The process of lifting the ban is called *Odadaa*, which is an elaborate flamboyant celebration preceded by the playing of the sacred drums, *Obonu*, which are seen only once in a year. The *Obonu* is kept in a secret place because it is believed among the traditionalists that the drums have a spiritual significance to the Ga deities.

The thirty-day noise ban prior to the implementation of the main festival has, however, become a topical issue in the otherwise, rich traditional celebration of *Homowo*. The ban imposed by the Ga Traditional Council (GTC) requires all residents including members of other ethnic groups and religions to adhere to the directive as a mark of respect to the Ga deities. This period is crucial because according to local beliefs, if the seedlings die, it signifies a year of bad fortune ahead and if they germinate and survive, it is an indication of a bumper harvest and a good year ahead of them.⁷ Nevertheless, the ban has not gone unchallenged by some residents of the city, especially the Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians, for whom loud sound practices generated by powerful public address (PA) systems and musical equipment remain a central part of their worship and the material ground for experiencing the divine. That is, to them God is experienced through the presence of the Holy Spirit in worship, what Birgit Meyer refers to as personal and social experience “shaped through particular, religiously transmitted and embodied filters of perception” (Meyer 2013:9; Meyer 2015:337).⁸

This legitimisation and contestation of the ban has led to various clashes between the two groups in the last two decades. The confrontations assumed violent proportions in May 31, 1998 when a group of Ga youth led by traditional priests attacked a prominent Pentecostal-Charismatic church, the Lighthouse Chapel International (LCI) in Korle-Gonno, a suburb of Accra, seized their musical equipment, injured many in the congregation and destroyed church property, with the explanation that the church violated the noise ban. Prior to the 1998 clashes, communities in and around Accra had largely ignored or complied with the ban without any conflict. Since then however, every year there have been attacks on the churches, followed by confiscation of musical instruments by the traditionalists and sometimes the churches respond with counter attacks or resistance. Besides the clashes with the LCI, there has been other equally prominent confrontations including the GTC and Victory Bible Church in 1999 and GTC versus Christ Apostolic Church in 2001 and many others. The *modus operandi* of these Ga priests and youth is that they go to the churches on Sunday in large groups, sometimes in vans, dressed in red, wielding machetes and sticks and singing traditional war songs. Once they get to a church believed to be in breach of the noise ban, they go straight to the musical instruments, seize drums, keyboards and other sound transmitting equipment. If they do not meet any opposition, then the instruments are conveyed to the offices of the traditional council. The church is then instructed to come to their offices

⁷ Nuumo Akwaa Mensa II, *Interview with Nai Wubmo* by author, Accra, Feb 17, 2014.

⁸ Article 26 of the 1992 Constitution guarantees ‘the right to maintain and promote culture, language, tradition and religion.’ Article 21(1)(c) states that ‘All persons shall have the right to freedom to practise any religion and to manifest such practice.’ The Pentecostal-Charismatics argue especially on the biblical injunctions ‘...have no other gods before me’ (Exodus 20:3 KJV) and ‘Make a joyful noise unto the Lord...’ (Psalm 100:1 KJV), which they believe enjoins them not to heed to the directives of the traditionalists.

to pay a fine in order to retrieve their instruments. On the other hand, if they face opposition, then they fight back to repel the resistance, which sometimes ends in bloody encounters. Despite successive Ghanaian governments employing several strategies to mitigate or intervene, this conflict⁹ has endured to the extent that it has become a stain on Ghana's credential as a peaceful state in an often-troubled West African sub-region.

While the conflict has both religious and cultural aspects, there are other underlying triggering factors which makes it difficult for its nature to be strictly defined.¹⁰ According to some of my informants however, the real motivation behind the violent clashes is economic and political rather than a religio-cultural one, because the majority of the Ga youth mainly involved in the violence are not driven by religious motives. However, most of these informants were Christians and obviously “people who identify themselves as religious sometimes argue that the real motivation behind so-called religious violence are, by definition not religious” (Cavanaugh, 2009:9). It is important, though, to stress that religious motivation is at the forefront of the encounter between the two groups. Having said that, it is equally significant to note that other factors such as social, economic and political come to play in these confrontations. While it is difficult to detach, “the religious from economic and political motives in such a way that the religious motives are innocent of violence,” the question really is, how important are the factors outside of religion and culture? (Ibid: 5). Are they so crucial we no longer want to classify the conflict as a religious one? How do they contribute to the intractable nature of the conflict? Drawing from a year-long participatory field research and existing literature, this paper examines why the conflict has protracted. Let us now look at the theoretical considerations that informs the analysis.

Theoretical reflections

To ascertain the conundrum of why violent conflicts were prevalent in some religiously and ethnically plural societies while being absent in others of such composition, several theoretical conceptualisations have been employed to study the sources of social conflicts in multi-ethnic settings in Africa. Three prominent ones are Stewart's (2008) ‘horizontal inequalities,’ Collier's (1998) ‘concept of greed’ and Zartman's (2005, 2008) ‘need, creed and greed’. First, Stewart asserts that the causes of violent conflicts and wars are horizontal inequalities (HIs), which she defines as ‘inequalities in economic, social or political dimensions or cultural status between culturally defined groups’ (2008: 3). Accordingly, she argues for policies of affirmative action against all forms of horizontal inequalities (political, social and cultural) between identity groups in a nation-state as that will lessen the HIs and consequently, the possibility of conflict. But to deal with HIs as independent variables is problematic because as pointed out by Brown and Langer (2010), identities themselves may be shaped by inequalities, becoming less prominent as inequality is reduced and *vice versa*. This theory nevertheless has been used to study conflicts in Ghana and Nigeria in recent times (Langer and Ukiwo 2008; Asante 2011). Second, Collier suggests that ‘greed’ rather than ‘grievance’ leads to wars and other violent conflicts in multi-communal settings. In that sense, he is arguing that these conflicts take place when it is financially or sometimes militarily rewarding – that is, his interest is in the economic aspects of civil wars and other internal conflicts. Collier cites

⁹ Conflict is here defined as ‘the pursuit of incompatible goals by different groups.’ Ramsbotham et al, 2011, 30.

¹⁰ In this paper, I follow an approach that sees religion and culture as two separate entities but constantly interacting with each other.

examples of conflicts where greed was the main factor in places such as Sierra Leone, DR Congo, and Angola where avidity over diamonds and other natural resource extractions in a multi-ethnic setting led to prolonged conflicts. Nevertheless, Collier and other proponents of this theory such as Hoeffler and Rohner entirely ignore or downplay the role of existing social grievances and other culture related subjects such as language, religion and customs as possible causes of conflicts. Third, along the lines of the ‘greed’ theory, Zartman and Arnson (2005) show how the intersection of ‘need, creed and greed’ plays a role at various stages to bring about violent intra-state conflicts. The need phase he argues, could be poverty, discrimination, inequality or injustices, which lead to the creed phase, where ethnicity or other identity based factors such as religion becomes the main element that political figures exploit to bring perceived marginalised or affected groups together to fight to defend their constituency. This then gives rise to the greed factor, where the “temptation to turn the means into ends begins to rise.” Therefore, for Zartman and Arnson all conflicts contain these factors and it is more about how these different parameters come together to cause and sustain violent conflicts. This framework has also been applied in Angola where UNITA exploited ethnic identities; Afghanistan, where the Taliban exploited religious identities and in Colombia, where the FARC rebels exploited class and geography (2005:273).

Nevertheless, in this paper, Edward Azar’s protracted social conflict (PSC) is employed as an alternative framework to all the three aforementioned perspectives to examine why the conflict between the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in Ghana and the Ga traditionalists has lingered to date (1985; 1990; 1991: 91). Azar, a conflict resolution expert put forward one of the earliest theoretical conceptualisations in the 1970s, aimed at comprehensively explaining and analysing the protractedness of violent intra-state conflicts. This served as the foundation on which many PSC scholars have built, although Oliver Ramsbotham argues that further development beyond his original model has been limited (2005). There are two reasons for using Azar’s framework in this paper. First, I proceed on the premise that this conflict has endured for almost two decades and therefore has become a protracted social conflict, that is, “the prolonged and often violent struggle by communal groups for such basic needs as security, recognition and acceptance, fair access to political institutions and economic participation” (1990:6). At the heart of these conflicts is mostly religious, cultural or ethnic communal identity and “they are not easily suppressed, and continue to be pursued in the long term by all means available” (1991:91). Accordingly, Azar’s PSC helps us to understand the protractedness of the conflict. Second, this framework emphasises the sources of the conflict are usually intra-state while also highlighting the external sources and actors that contribute to inflaming such conflicts. Third, Azar’s framework, unlike the three aforementioned is a synthesis of both the ‘greed’ and ‘grievance’ theories in conflict studies, making it more dynamic and comprehensive.

Encounters with Diversity: Accra as a Multi-Communal City

As was alluded to earlier, several overt sources including the sound practices and theological inclinations of the Pentecostals, the resurgence of Ga indigenous religion, fundamentalism, among others have been cited by several scholars as the root causes of this conflict (Van Dijk 2001; De Witte 2008; Amanor 2009; Asamoah-Gyadu 2009; Attuquayefio 2012). I argue however, that it is the covert underlying sources of the conflict that has protracted it. Foremost, I maintain that the multi-communal setting of Accra contributes enormously to the conflict. Accra is a cosmopolitan city with diverse

ethnic, religious and even racial groups. Traditionally, the city stretches from the *Densu* River in the west to the *Laloi* lagoon in the east (Field 1937: 1-3). Present day Accra unlike other big cities such as Kumasi and Sekondi-Takoradi, has become the most ethnically heterogeneous city - a melting pot of different cultures, religions and lifestyles. It is a microcosm of the entire country with almost all the ethnic groups represented. This unique status has been facilitated by several factors such as a complex history of pre-colonial settlements, colonial and post-colonial administrations, territorial expansion, influx of migrants and commerce (De Witte 2016: 3). According to the recent population census, the Akan are the dominant group in the Greater Accra region followed by the Ga-Dangbe, who have a first-comer status and are indigenous to the region (Ghana Statistical Council 2012:40).¹¹

Obviously, all the ethnic and racial groups who move to Accra also come with their religion and diverse cultures. For example, most of the ethnicities coming from the north of Ghana are predominantly adherents of Islam and are found in the Muslim dominated settlements within the city. The Akan and the Ewe people from southern and middle Ghana are mainly Christians with some traditionalists among them. The Indian population are mainly Hindus who worship in the city's main Hindu temple on the Odorkor-Kaneshie main road. The majority of the native Ga people are Christians, but a significant number of them especially those who live in the traditional coastal areas also follow the Ga indigenous religion, known as *Kpele*. Accordingly, the Greater Accra region is a multi-communal area with residents from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. While the traditionalists recognise the fact that Accra is a multi-communal city, they also insist on their customs being adhered to by the various groups in the city. This is because they believe the dominant Akan groups follow their traditional customs in the comparatively homogeneous Akan areas like Kumasi but tend to ignore Ga traditions when they locate to Accra with the reason that Accra belongs to all Ghanaians.¹² Thus traditional beliefs are presumed by the traditionalists to prevail over the differentiated landscape of the city of Accra.

Although Fearon and Laitin (1996) have argued that the majority of all ethnically heterogeneous communities are not violent, Samuel Huntington (1996) in his 'clash of civilizations' disagrees and posits that there is an inevitable likelihood of violent clashes involving communities with multiple racial, ethnic and cultural differences. Despite agreeing with Fearon and Laitin, Stewart argues that conflicts of a violent nature within multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies are on the rise in the African continent (2008:3). Azar also posits that the communal content of a society is one of the conditions which needs to be met in order for a PSC to emerge (1990:1-3). Accra's multi-communal status is rather complicated as it has been influenced by external factors such as the colonial legacy of land alienation through a European style land tenure system, foreign to the local notions of land usage, which has led to communal anxieties within the traditional areas of the city. Large tracts of land which were expropriated from the Ga by the British colonial government to develop the city have not been returned to the families by the post-colonial administrations, even after the leases expired. Rather, successive governments in the fourth republic (1992 to date) have sold these lands to the political elite and government sympathisers. Land issues have therefore become an area which has fuelled this conflict especially as the powerful Charismatics overlook the allodia custodians, to acquire lands for their ever-expanding ministries. This, coupled

¹¹ Per the Census figures, while the Akan make up 1,528,177, the Ga-Dangbe constitutes 1,056,158 of the population of the Greater Accra Region.

¹² Nuumo Ogbamey III, Interview with Sakumo Wulomɔ by author, Accra, Sep 25, 2015.

with internal dynamics of the dominance of the Akan groups in the nation-state as well as a history of pre-colonial rivalry between the Akan and the Ga contributes immensely to the conflict between the Ga traditionalists and the Akan dominated Charismatic church groups (Sackeyfio 2012:97). Azar identifies the multicultural composition of a community, brought about by external factors such as the colonial legacies and internal factors like historical patterns of rivalry between the groups as setting the stage for the emergence of a PSC (1990:7).

Unmet Human Needs

Next, I argue that the deprivation of human needs is an underlying cause of this conflict. For Azar, needs, unlike interests are ontological and therefore not negotiable, which if not addressed can lead to extreme violent conflicts. He particularly refers to acceptance needs (including cultural and religious expressions), access needs and security needs as areas of great concern. To begin with, access needs is described as the recognition of a person's identity defined in terms of common cultural values and heritage (Azar 1990:7-9). Identity is a complicated concept because there are diverse ways of conceptualising it namely, primordial, instrumentalist and social constructionist notions (Brown and Langer 2010). Different notions of identity play out among the parties to the present conflict but particularly religion, ethnicity and the region people come from in Ghana have been of particular interest. Typically, when the Ga traditionalists talk about their identity it is in reference to ethnicity and religion in the primordial sense of the word, which is that identities that are linked to their ancestry or kinship. Otherwise, they use identity as a tool for mobilising the youth in the sense of the instrumental notions of the word. Whereas the Charismatic group cannot be said to be entirely free from the assumption of the primordial character of identity, they tend rather to emphasise the born-again experience, which ultimately means a break from tradition and the past. Accordingly, they tend to use identity in the instrumentalist sense as they make use of their multiple identities (ethnicity, religion and region). The Ga Charismatic Christians for example have the propensity to use their Ga identity as and when it is relevant. This can be illustrated with a case in 1999 in which the Victory Bible Church was attacked by the Ga youth and the church's bishop, Nii Tackie Yarboi, used his identity as a Ga native to dialogue with the priests.¹³ It is clear then, that at any given point in time one aspect of a person's or a group's identity can become more important to them than other features of it.

One of the grievances expressed by the Ga traditionalists is the issue of the decline of the use of the Ga language in the Greater Accra region. Language is an essential part of a person's identity, what Azar refers to as acceptance need. It is a profoundly emotional aspect of their Ga identity which forms a critical part of their belonging. Several leaders of the GTC have bemoaned the loss of interest in the Ga language in the school system and the media. What makes this issue critical is that in the Ghanaian educational system, schools are by law supposed to adopt the regional language as part of the curriculum for primary education, a practice that is adhered across the country. However, in Accra many of the schools teach Twi, one of the Akan dialects at the expense of Ga, probably because the Ga are not the majority group in the city. As this grievance regarding the lack of use of the Ga language is always presented by its

¹³ Nuumo Ogbamey III, *Interview with Sakumo Wulomo by author*, Accra, Sep 25, 2015; *The Independent*, May 18, 1999, 3; Nii Tackie Yarboi is a Ga royal and was a potential Ga king.

advocates, the GTC, the priests and the Ga elite as a collective one, it becomes even more important to address it since it borders on the identity of the people as a group. Azar (1990:9) argues that grievances of this nature, that is, those resulting from need deprivation and expressed collectively, if not redressed by the appropriate authorities, ‘cultivates a niche for a protracted social conflict.’ In this case, the lack of universal acceptance of the Ga language as the dominant language in the multicultural and multi-ethnic environment could be interpreted as need deprivation. The GTC’s argument, though, is that their language, their cultural practices and religion, which distinguish them from all other groups in Ghana should remain vibrant in their traditional homeland. It becomes even more crucial because these sentiments are expressed collectively with undertones of ethnicity at the heart of it and always in relation to the treatment of the Akan groups by the authorities.

Furthermore, along with access and acceptance needs, there are security needs also at the centre of the clashes. Azar refers to material needs or infrastructural variables for physical security, nutrition, housing and so forth (1990:9). One of the critical security needs that has been expressed in this conflict is the lack of proper housing within the traditional Ga settlements because of widespread poverty within these communities. Most of the Ga youth involved in the annual fracas with the Charismatic churches are unemployed or lack economic opportunities, which contributes to the situation where some of them attack churches and extort money from them without the consent of the Ga priests or the traditional council. Accordingly, the ban period basically becomes a ‘harvest time’ for these unemployed youths to use as an avenue to make a living. Thus, the youth unemployment, housing deficit, and other security needs in the traditional areas constitute the ground for the Ga youth to foment the chaos that finally leads to a PSC. This then brings us to the centrality of the nation-state’s role in these ongoing clashes.

The Role of the State

According to Azar, state governance and the role of the state are fundamental factors in either frustrating or satisfying individual or identity group needs. In a protracted social conflict, a dominant social group’s monopolisation of power restricts the ability of the state to meet the needs of all social groups (Azar 1990: 10). While the monopolisation of power by one particular social group might not apply to Ghana, it is significant here to look at how different Ghanaian governments have dealt with the grievances expressed by the Ga traditionalists. From independence in 1957, the Ga nationalist groups such as Ga Steadfast Association (*Ga shifimo kpee*) were formed to protect the general interest of the Ga people on such critical issues as lands and resistance to the dominance of the Akan majority group. The government of Kwame Nkrumah adopted several means to deal with these Ga groups. First, since the group was deemed xenophobic by government, perhaps because they aligned themselves with the opposition parties, the government adopted legislation such as the Avoidance of Discrimination Act (1957), which forbade the formation of parties along regional, religious and ethnic lines; and the Preventive Detention Act (1958), which gave the state the right to detain anyone deemed a threat to national security for five years without trial. This legislation was introduced as a measure to control and coerce groups like the Ga nationalists (Quarcoopome 1992:49). Second, the Kwame Nkrumah led government also formed a counter Ga nationalist group, *Ga ekome feemo kpee* (Ga Unity Group) to nullify the effect of the *Ga shifimo kpee* and to confront its use of violence to express the grievances of the Ga-Dangbe people.

Accordingly, the state apparatus in the first republic employed coercive repression and co-optation at the same time to deal with the concerns raised by the Ga-Dangbe group.

When Ghana returned to democratic rule in 1992, pressure groups such as the Ga-Dangbe Council was also formed to press forward with the land issue and the general concerns of the Ga people. During the first government (1992-2000) of the fourth republic led by Jerry Rawlings, there was a renewed nationalism of the Ga people through the implementation of the noise ban by the GTC. The 1998 confrontations between the Charismatic groups and the traditionalists became the first major conflict in Accra to confront the National Democratic Congress (NDC) government, although land issues had been a constant in the region. While the government sought a resolution between the churches and the GTC, there were reports of politicisation of ethnicity by state functionaries. First, the minister of interior, Nii Okaija Adamafo was accused by the Christian groups of siding with his people, since he is Ga and was the Member of Parliament for the *Odododiodio* constituency, which covers central Accra. Second, the Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council (GPCC) boycotted the committee that was set up to try and resolve the impasse between the LCI and traditionalists in the Korle-Gonno area because they believed the state was not an impartial arbiter as they had sided with the Ga traditionalists to gain political capital in the Greater Accra region, which over the years has been a ‘swing state’ along with the Central Region, critical in determining which political party wins power (*Daily Graphic*, Jun 9, 1998; Ghana Pentecostal Council, Press Statement, Jun 3, 1998:1).

The issue of politicisation of ethnicity in the fourth republic came to full expression in the run up to the 2000 elections. News was circulating in Accra that a vote for the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) was a vote for the Akan (Ashanti) to dominate the political landscape and establish cultural hegemony over the other ethnic groups. Some leading members of the Ga-Dangbe Council used the perceived marginalisation of the Ga people to warn people against voting for the NPP. The NPP administration came under even more pressure when some aggrieved members of the Ga-Dangbe Council, who were also leading members of the NDC used the 2001 confrontations between the Charismatic churches and the GTC to incite the Ga people against other ethnic groups as a way of discrediting the NPP government (Asante 2011: 106). Therefore, in addition to the co-optation and repressive strategies adopted by the Nkrumah government to deal with Ga issues, the political elite have also employed demonising propaganda such as capitalising on the conflict to politicise ethnicity at the expense of their opponents.

However, the NPP government not wanting to be perceived as opponents of the Ga people, shifted the focus of the conflict from one of religion and ethnicity based, to an environmentalist discussion from 2002, where noise was now treated as an environmental hazard. This enabled the government to use a task force of officers from the Environmental Protection Agency, the Accra Metropolitan Assembly and the police to enforce the existing by-laws on abatement of noise nuisance. This shift of discourse while it minimised the clashes can be framed as a form of suppressive strategy by the government to deal with the conflict as well as move away from the distrust shown by some members of the Ga community towards the Akan dominated political party. The discursive shift meant that the government made the issue a matter of national law enforcement which strengthened its position as the impartial arbiter.

International connections

The fourth underlying source of the conflict is what Edward Azar refers to as *international linkages*, that is, the economic, political, and military relations that keep PSC laden states economically and/or politically dependent upon states that are richer and stronger than themselves (Azar 1990: 10). Ghana's economic dependency on the Bretton Woods institutions: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for so many years has been criticised as a source of stifling economic growth (Kanbur 2002). The country has been on and off IMF programmes since the resumption of the multi-party democracy in 1992. As recently as April 2015, the country went back to the IMF for a three-year extended credit facility to stabilise its economy.¹⁴ These facilities usually come with conditions that are arguably harsh on the local economy because they normally include austerity measures meant to instil fiscal discipline. These measures have often led to high taxation and recently, a freeze on employment especially in the public sector. This makes the country almost always unable to create adequate employment opportunities for its citizens and consequently, dependent on the more powerful Europeans and North Americans who control the Bretton Woods institutions for grants and aid (Boafo-Arthur 1999a, 1999b). This state of affairs coupled with corruption leaves many people in poverty especially in places like Accra where there is keen competition for jobs and housing. Additionally, unemployment leads to a general increase in frustration among the youth not only in the Ga areas but also in other parts of the country. Nevertheless, in the traditional areas of Accra, we see unemployment as contributing to the increase in the number of Ga youth involved in the attacks on the churches during the period of the ban.

Besides the impact of the austerity measures imposed by international financial institutions on the country, there is what I refer to as '*external insiders*' whose presence have a direct effect on the conflict over the noise ban. That is, the role played by the various Ga associations in the diaspora, who although outside the country, still inspire bodies like the GTC and the Ga-Dangbe Council to stand up for the right of the Ga people in matters such as land issues and enforcing the ban. There are Ga associations in many cities across North American and Europe who are constantly bringing the land issues and the noise ban into public discussions. They do that by sponsoring leaders of the Ga traditionalists and other Ga pressure groups and encouraging them to stand up for the cause of the Ga people. Due to the resources they pour into the activities of the pressure groups, their impact on the whole conflict is enormous and this very much fuels the clashes.¹⁵

Conflicting Parties and the State: Significance of Actors' Actions

The question really is how these four underlying sources, unlike the overt sources of the conflict, contribute to the protractedness of the same. In that sense, Azar argues that for any one of the underlying sources, which he calls, *clusters of preconditions for a PSC*, to start off overt conflicts, it will be dependent on the process dynamics, that is, communal actions and strategies; state action and strategies and the built-in mechanisms of conflict (Ramsbotham 2015:116). That suggests that any one of the underlying sources can trigger conflicts but the likelihood of protracting the conflict is dependent on how the

¹⁴ <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2015/cr15103.pdf>, Accessed Apr 15, 2016.

¹⁵ <https://www.gadangmeinternational.org>, Accessed Apr 16, 2016.

conflicting communities and the state (and by extension its institutions) approach all four preconditions. First, we look at the actions of the GTC and the Charismatic churches that have led to the present conflict. The two communities have taken entrenched positions, each appealing to the national constitution to justify their actions – the GTC insists the churches should respect their time-honoured tradition of the noise ban and the Charismatic churches insisting on their right to freedom of worship. The GTC sees this perceived lack of respect by the Charismatic churches for their tradition as a threat to the identity of the Ga people as an ethnic and religious group. Therefore, the GTC and mostly the *Wulɔmei* use ethnic and religious sentiments to organise and mobilise the Ga youth to enforce the noise ban. Since the reasons border on such identity needs as belief systems and culture, they incite passion which triggers violent responses from the Ga youth towards the Charismatic churches, who are considered being in contravention of the noise ban. On the other hand, the actions of the Charismatic group such as the disregard for the noise ban and the stigmatisation of indigenous religions deepens the tension between the parties.

Second, the approach of the state in dealing with the conflict, in particular and the grievances of the Ga people in general, have basically verged on coercive repression and instrumental co-option. Since the conflict assumed violent proportions in 1998, successive governments have taken several steps to mitigate it. They have done that by setting up various commissions of enquiry to ascertain the trigger factors. For instance, in 1998, the Awortwi Commission¹⁶ was established in the aftermath of the clashes between the LCI and the residents of Korle-Gonno. Thereafter, there were parliamentary commissions as well as the formation of the Greater Accra Permanent Conflict Resolution and Management Committee (GAPCRMC) to look into issues of land, chieftaincy, custom and religious based conflicts in the region. However, it is significant to state, that consecutive governments have not shown a total commitment to implement the findings of these commissions they set up. They have tended to put together committees at the height of the clashes but once the tension subsides and the reports are out, they were not implemented until the next year, thus, going round in circles.

Furthermore, while local government participation in the form of the Regional Coordinating Council (RCC) and the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) is considered critical in the resolution of the conflict, there seems to be a conflict in the roles played by each of these groups. For example, whereas the GTC publicly announces the noise ban annually, there have been occasions where both the RCC and the AMA have gone ahead with separate announcements. Therefore, there would seem to be no coordination among the local government agencies. Although the AMA is one of the metropolitan assemblies under the RCC and the confrontations mainly take place under its jurisdiction, there appears to be a conflict on whether the RCC or the AMA is directly responsible for the security of the area. Moreover, the Charismatic churches have from time to time pointed fingers at the AMA for taking the side of the traditionalists because most of its senior officers are Ga people. But this notion of bias is challenged by the fact that there are equally significant numbers of Charismatic Christians, who are Ga natives, working for the AMA.

¹⁶ The Awortwi Commission was headed by a Commissioner of Police and members from the traditional council, the Christian community and civil service. Significantly, the Ghana Pentecostal Council boycotted the sittings citing issues of bias on the part of the committee.

Additionally, some state institutions like the Ghanaian Police Service have not shown the interest required from a law enforcement agency. Despite the heated nature of the clashes on several occasions, the police either refused to make any arrests or they released culprits without pressing charges, usually after the intervention of senior government officials. This situation breeds impunity as culprits are allowed to go scot-free. A senior police officer at the police headquarters, however, revealed that since this conflict is religious they do not want to be seen to be taking sides and therefore, once the cases are reported they try to deal with it at a community level. As a result of this, although the conflict has been lingering they have no records of incidents of the clashes.¹⁷

Besides, successive governments have approached the conflict differently since 1998. The first NDC government led by Jerry Rawlings, which had a Ga native, Nii Okaija Adamafo as the minister of interior politicised ethnicity to make political gains in the traditionally Ga dominated areas of Accra such as Ga Mashie, Osu, La, Teshie, Nungua and Tema. This is a form of an instrumental cooption which worked for the Ga traditionalists as well as the NDC as a party. The John Kufuor led government shifted emphasis on the noise ban from one of religious to environmental protection by employing civil servants as a task force to abate noise nuisance. This shifted the focus from the government to local assembly by-laws and therefore, the government could not be accused of taking sides. However, because of the winner-takes-all political practice that is prevalent in Ghana, this change of focus away from government can be understood as a type of repression rather than an accommodation of the conflicting parties. To put it differently, the shift to clamping down on noise pollution was the government's way of employing legal means to contain an otherwise sensitive subject for both the traditionalists and the churches. This repressive approach by the NPP ultimately led to a reduction in the clashes between 2002 and 2008. This demonstrates that there have been fluctuations in the clashes depending on which political party is in power. For instance, from 1998 to 2001 the clashes were more intense, then it subsided between 2002 and 2008 and then from 2009 to 2016 it was reinvigorated, although not to the same intensity as the first period. These periods however, coincide with the NDC-NPP-NDC political regimes, which shows clearly that when the NDC is in power, the clashes are more intense, perhaps because they are friendly to the Ga traditionalists since they dominate in the traditional areas, occupying most parliamentary seats.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at how some covert factors have combined to protract the conflict over the noise ban between the Ga traditionalists and Charismatic churches in Accra, Ghana. I have argued that the following factors have contributed considerably to the enduring nature of the conflict. First, is the need based grievances expressed collectively by the Ga people, such as identity related concerns including the growing perception among them that their culture, religion and language are under threat. Also, the state's inability to address the land question, poor housing conditions, youth unemployment and poverty in the traditionally Ga neighbourhoods of Accra. Second, the political elites' penchant to use the conflict for propaganda purposes including politicisation of ethnicity for political capital. Therefore, while this conflict has nominally been considered religio-cultural based, we see that, it also reflects an intersection of

¹⁷ DCOP Ampah-Benin, *Interview with the head of Ghana Police Public Relations Director*, Jan 15, 2015.

identity issues, resource based grievances, basic need deprivation and governance issues. These underlying factors, along with the entrenched positions assumed by the parties because each group believes they have rights and freedoms guaranteed by the national constitution, only leads to increased insecurity and social fragmentation in the city. The insistence of rights and freedoms from both communities *vis-à-vis* the posture of the state institutions and political elite means this conflict will persist or at best, fluctuate.

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***Tähadiso* Movement a Myth or Reality?**

Inter-Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo*

Church Rivalries

Meron Zeleke and Kiya Gezahegne¹

Abstract

Religious reformist movements are often described to have lasting socio-economic and political outcomes in a given setting. This paper aims to understand the development of the *Tähadiso* movement within the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church and the complexity of rivalries emerging. The paper will further try to show the populist representation of reformist concepts of the *Tähadiso* movement within and outside the church by drawing on discourses regarding the contentions, the struggles, and the controversies surrounding the *Tähadiso* reformist groups as raised by different actors. The central questions to be dealt with in this paper include: what is *Tähadiso*? How does the movement evolve through time? How can *Tähadiso* movement be best understood, as an established reformist movement, a sect within the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church (EOTC), or a myth? Who has an active agency in the reformist movement? What effects and implications do such movements have on the church? By expounding on these questions, this paper will sketch out the understanding of the embryonic idea of *Tähadiso* and its place within the contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church.

KEY WORDS: *Tähadiso*, Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo*, Religious Reform

Brief Overview of Reformist Movements within the EOTC

For long, Ethiopia has been considered as “an island of Christianity”, the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church (EOTC) being the mainstream religion of the society and the official national religion whereby other religious groups were often considered as ‘new’ with an ‘outsider’ status (Robinson 1976). Long established and rooted in ancient traditions, the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church dominated the social, economic and political life of citizens’ at large (Tadesse 1974).

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A number of movements, however, have arisen in the church's history with the aim to re-examine the doctrinal position and to "purify" the church. This paper argues that a full understanding of the contemporary reformist movement within the EOTC needs a diachronic approach to the subject matter, as the "new" developments in and around the church relates at large to the history of several generations of reformist endeavours and thoughts influenced by both internal and external factors. Some accounts on the reformist movements within the EOTC dates back to the medieval period. The reformist teachings by Dekika Estifanos (decedents of Estifanos) (1406-1478 EC) in Northern Ethiopia targeted the main teachings of EOTC including saint intercession, mystery of the Trinity and adoration of religious images (Hable Selassie 1997; Maimire 2010). This movement from within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was considered as heretic and faced fierce resistance from King Zara Yacob (Maimire 2010; Tadesse 1972). Furthermore, the controversy between two religious groups, followers of father Tekle Haimanot (the head of Debre Libanos monastery and founder of several monasteries in southern Ethiopia) and father Ewostatewos (founder of several monasteries in today's Eritrea and Armenia) on the celebration of the Sabbath was another development in the medieval period that led to sectarian movements within the church. The former was in favour of minting the old EOTC and Alexandrian position of celebrating the Sabbath on a Sunday while Ewostatewos called for the celebration on Saturday as stipulated in the Old Testament. Another "face of Ethiopian Christianity", as Fargher (1996) puts it, came into being with the missionary-evangelists. One of such reformist movement in the EOTC is often referred back to the Portuguese missionaries of the 17th century who brought spiritual instability and doctrinal controversies within the EOTC. The Jesuit missionary teaching, expelled in 1632, and the controversy that followed ended dividing the church over the nature of Christ. The controversies surrounding the nature of Christ led to sectarian reformist ideas and the emergence of three doctrinal schools of thought on the nature of Christ. The first of the three the Tewahdo doctrine is the official teaching of the Church of Ethiopia which confesses the unity of two natures of Christ, divine and human whereby the term Tewahdo ("unity") signifies this central teaching. The second group was called Qebat, "unction", and this doctrine stresses the anointing of Christ and not upon the incarnation of the Son. The third group was Tsegga Lej (Son of Grace) which on the other hand supported the teaching of the "Three Births": eternal birth of the Son from the Father, genetic birth of the Son from the Virgin Mary and birth from the Holy Ghost after the incarnation of Jesus. The orthodoxy of the church was put into question with a call for reconstruction of belief within the church. This was laid to rest in 1855 when the *Tewahdo* doctrine was renounced by Emperor Tewodros (c. 1818 – April 13, 1868) as the only accepted and established doctrine in the country (Sergew 1972). Any doctrinal stance opposed to this was hence regarded as a heretical teaching and thus condemned.

Yet, the questions and the call for reformation raised by the different reformist zeal of the Portuguese missionaries were not evaded. The council of Boru Meda (1878) was held in Wollo to put an end to such controversies, to weed out Nestorians (heretics), and unite the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Nonetheless, the reformist movement within the EOTC continued, though in different forms and stages, up to the present time as will be presented in the following section of the paper.

In "recent" times, a new reformist movement has arisen within the EOTC named as *Täbadiso*, which calls out for a reform from within the church. *Täbadiso*, is a noun with the literal meaning reform which in the context of the reformist movement within the EOTC stands for the renewal of the old EOTC and some of its religious traditions. This

reformist movement questions the “syncretistic” practices within the Orthodox Church and the ‘impurity’ ingrained within it. According to sympathisers of the movement, these ‘impure’ traditions have for long been syncretised and legitimised into the churches official belief and practices. Thus, there is a dire need to cleanse it. And thus, the movement claims to be an old advocate for the return to “*pure tradition*” of the church rather than an inception of a different religion separate from the EOTC. The aim is thus, not to establish a new church, as claimed by the counter movement, but bring a reform from within. The leader of a German evangelical mission in Ethiopia, Gustaf Oren, explained the *Täbadiso* movement being not to establish a different church, rather to revitalise the spiritual life within the EOTC².

As to the argument of Sergew Habte Selassie (1969), in the 20th century, reform of the church was not possible through a foreign institution with no understanding of the national life and problems. Hence, the missionary, “intentionally by-passed the Orthodox model and made a fresh start”; and this gained them relatively better acceptance. From 1950 to the 1990s, the missionary was able to look into the problems of the church and made use of this to condemn it as wrongful. From 1990 onwards, however, the *Täbadiso* accepted the church as the right one but made a distinction between the old EOTC and the new EOTC, the new being in the wrong direction and in need of reformation. They attempted to show the reform is all about taking out foreign elements integrated into the church through time. The objective is often described as not setting up a new church as such but introducing reforms within the church. This objective of reforming the church from within is clearly discussed in a magazine named *Finota Berhan* published in 2010 by Yemiserach Agelgelot, a protestant publishing house. The movement was not fully welcomed by the church and later went underground for their teaching surfaced in public as protestant and individuals were condemned out of the church.

Learning from the mistakes of the Jesuits, the *Täbadiso* movement was legitimised in being Ethiopian and ‘indigenous’. This, for those arguing against the movement, is an indigenisation of the global protestant movement framing it as an Ethiopian Orthodox reformist move. The movement is not solely limited to Ethiopia but also extends to other oriental and eastern orthodox churches. The “Living church” movement in Russia, the Martoma in India and the *Täbadiso* in Eritrea are all described to have the objective of westernising the Orthodox Church and expanding the occidental protestant into the east. The formation of the Indian sectarian church named the oriental protestant, the Martoma, is described to be one of the successful reformist movements targeting the orthodox churches. *Täbadiso* is hence seen as an evangelical missionary movement aimed at taking over the church from within.

Informants mention the existence of different denominations of the *Täbadiso* which were said to be prominent at different times. The “Church Missionary Society”, led by Alfred Bakston, is one among many, which came to Ethiopia in 1934 with such ideology. Associations were formed such as *Mahibere Bekur*, which was established in 1983 EC. The association had a regular magazine *Chora* targeted at criticising different literature produced by the mainline church³. The other denomination of the *Täbadiso* worth mentioning is the *Finote Hiwot Mahibere Medhanealem* which was vibrant in the eastern part of Ethiopia mainly in Dire Dawa and Adama towns. Unlike the *Mahibere Bekur* this mainly targeted *mahiberats* (associations). *Haimanota Abaew* is another movement from the

² <http://youtubegogogo.com/video/n-PdykMta3s/-2-6>

³ A *mahiber* is an informal association usually made up of laypeople who meet on specific days of the month dedicated to a saint.

1960's which originally was established with the objective of teaching young Ethiopian Orthodox Christians as a way of protecting them from protestant teaching. This movement had originally the name Ethiopian Students Association and was established in 1959. For the first four years the association was vibrant in and around universities. Upon joining the World Christian Student's Federation, the association has adopted the main motto of the federation, unity within diversity, which calls for a universal manifestation of christen faith by passing religious groups. In the long term, *Haimanot Abaew* has officially called for reformist moves such as using modern musical instruments for spiritual songs which is to be discussed under section 2 of the paper as one of the main controversial issues. The association has managed in converting hundreds in Dire Dawa, Haraar, and Adama towns. It was also effective in Selassie cathedral, Lideta Mariam and Debre Berhan Kidus Goyorigis churches in Addis Ababa. The association was officially banned by the EOTC pope Abune Tekelehaiminaot on February 18, 1988. These are some more associations under the *Tähadiso* denominations raised by key informants as a way of demystifying the reformist movements within the EOTC and giving exemplary cases including *Kidist Ledeta Mabiber* which was active in Addis Ababa.

There is a change of strategy adopted over time to reform the EOTC. Regardless, as to the countermovement, the main nature of the *Tähadiso* movement can be seen within the framework of contextual evangelisation which calls for change from within using the language of the church. Accordingly, a leaked video released on YouTube shows how members of the *Tähadiso* movement confessing to these allegations and intruding the church⁴. Such intrusions as shown in this video relates to the underground missions whereby the reformists use converted EOTC church clergy to reach out to the mass. Furthermore, according to key informant interviews and the wide public opinions expressed in different social media accent the reformists have intruded the EOTC through renowned church singers and preachers who have dual loyalty. Some of the preachers and singers have been banned from attending any religious congregations of the EOTC based on allegations that they have been working with the *Tähadiso* movement for a long time. This indicates the reformation movements, which can be traced back to the fifteenth century and further, have continued to exist within the EOTC in different forms and with varied intentions. A number of studies, though not many, have been conducted on contemporary religious movements in Ethiopia (Abbink 2009; Dereje 2014; Fargher 1996; Haustein 2011; Meron, 2015, 2016; Ostebo 2007, 2009; Tibebe 2009). Most of the few existing literature, however, focuses on inter-religious movements and interactions. This paper adds to the existing literature by examining intra-religious movements within the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church by drawing on the case of the *Tähadiso* reformist zeal.

The *Tähadiso* Movement: Elements of Contestation and Discourses of Authenticity

As briefly discussed above, the *Tähadiso* movement unlike the prior reformist movements within the EOTC abundantly calls for transforming the church and its practices from within. This section of the paper presents the central tenets of the reformist movement and its major contestations and lines of differentiation from the mainline EOTC as presented by members of the reformist movement and some informants from the

⁴ For further details see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3javBPBkgI>

EOTC.

Embedded within the “one religion, one baptism” ideology of the church, the *Täbadiso* and its counter movement contested over the ‘rightful’ Orthodox Church. Within this lies discourses of authenticity and legitimacy among different agencies, including the government and the church as an institution. These discourses were the centre of discussion over different social media platforms, where we, as researchers, came to know of *Täbadiso* and the counter movement.

One of the key elements which adherents of the movement object is the use of Geez language in the church. Geez has for long been the official language of the EOTC and the language of worship which is described as a language apt for preservation of unity of believers in a highly diversified socio-cultural setting of Ethiopia. *Täbadiso* calls for the use of Amharic and other languages as a way of enhancing the participation of members of the mystical body in the public worship of the church.

The other line of contestation is the belief in saint intercession and their intermediary role. This according to some key informants and members of *Mahibere Kidusan*⁵ links the *Täbadiso* to the Lutheran interpretation of faith that stresses the direct link between God rejecting the intermediaries such as the church, the clergy and saints. Likewise, the *Täbadiso* also accents on the responsibility of the individual to directly communicate with God. The other element of contestation relates to the use of musical instruments for spiritual church songs. The traditional church musical instruments used in EOTC include the *Tsenasil* (a type of sistrum), *begenä* (string instrument with ten strings), *kebero* (drum), and *masinqo* (a single-stringed bowed lute). As part of the reform, *Täbadiso* calls for use of modern instruments for church songs as a way of appealing to the youth and reforming the old traditions of the church.

The other element of contestation is on the nature of fasting at EOTC. According to the EOTC traditions, there are special days and occasions appointed for fasting. The fasting moments imply abstention from meat, fats and dairy products instead cereals and vegetables devoid of fats. Adherents of *Täbadiso* movement strongly condemn this act as an act seeking publicity for what is otherwise meant to be personal religious devotion. The *Täbadiso* movement further challenges the practice of removing shoes while entering the church. For the EOTC this is considered as an appropriate action as a way of showing deep reverence to the church since the liturgy is celebrated in a sacred place. Another element of contestation relates to the dressing code of the EOTC. While attending church services, EOT Christians usually wear *shamá*⁶. This is described by the *Täbadiso* as a norm that has no formal religious ground.

In addition to the call for reform on the tradition of the church mentioned above, the *Täbadiso* movement has what they call *Ye'emnet Meglecha*, where they are calling for a revision or reform of the church canon and dogma which they believe are against the bible. In fact, they argue that there is no need of a canon given that individual interpretation is allowed. According to the *Täbadiso*, every individual is or can become a

⁵ *Mahibere kidusan* was established during the military regime, when Addis Ababa university students were sent to Blaté military training college in the last years of the *Därg*. The association focused on supporting the religious education offered at churches, and advancing religious education for students studying at secular universities and other higher academic institutions

⁶ *Shama* is often draped around the shoulders often drawn up over the chin and worn over the head exposing only the face.

priest for herself/himself. Last but not least, advocates of the *Täbadiso* movement mention that EOTC has gender disparity whereby women are often excluded from church positions including the priesthood.

In the debate of keeping tradition and bringing back the old church tradition, the words 'tradition' and 'time' has been put to question and debated among different actors, with different positions towards the movement. The concept of time differs to all actors involved and is the core of the *Täbadiso* movement. For the *Täbadiso*, time is accompanied with experiences which are not part of the church. They claim to be children of the forefathers, and thus as set by Luther, the way back to the original teaching of the apostles, ignored by the EOTC, should be established once again within the church through such movements. Meanwhile, for the church, it is an embrace for the long standing tradition, the holy tradition (*tenfit*), which the *Täbadiso* movement is against. It can thus be argued that the concept of time is seen as a discursive tradition defined by actors and agency.

Proponents of the *Täbadiso* argue that they are shunned out of the church by fundamentals not because of their standpoint, but rather due to the injustices going on around the church, which accounts for the reason they are trying to bring reform. For westerners, the church is considered to be the most authoritative and abusive institution which adds up to the notion of victimhood raised by this reformist group. Furthermore, adherents of the *Täbadiso* movement claim that complicated bureaucracy and corruption have led the church into an unstable structure. Ethnic conflicts and aspects of nepotism going in and around the church add up to the problems that EOTC is facing these days. These points are often raised by the *Täbadiso* proponents as a way of justifying the need for reform.

Multifaceted Counter Movements Targeting the *Täbadiso*

The resurgence of the *Täbadiso* reformist movement within the EOTC has raised fierce reaction from the mainstream EOTC believers. The emergence of *Täbadiso* has called for self-reflection within the church. Such counter movements to the *Täbadiso* to be presented in this section of the paper have adopted different strategies among which the use of social media is the major means to reach out to the community of believers at large.

Among the followers of the EOTC, there are different perceptions regarding the *Täbadiso* movement. There are some groups of informants who regard the problem to be the responsibility of the church not individual followers. Others support the movement for the church needs structural reform. Still some mention *Täbadiso* as a myth, far from reality. These different opinions have been reflected in social media and by key informants interviewed in the course of our research.

The major step in countering the movement dates back to the official denouncing of the *Täbadiso* by the synod which officially disclosed the existence of anti-EOTC and a reformist movement. Informant's emphasise the point that this has set the landmark in countering the movement and developing different strategies towards that end.

Since the *Täbadiso* movement focuses on individual followers, the counter movement has also been focusing on convincing individual followers of the EOTC and the lowest

structures of the church, that the *Täbadiso* movement is anti-EOTC and thus has to be eradicated from the church once and for all. One of the major measures being taken as a way of tackling the reformist movement is educating the mass and raising awareness of the community of believers about the very existence of *Täbadiso*. This according to key informants is a necessary step due to the fact that there are some members of the EOTC who question the very existence of the movement and who rather describe the discourses related to the movement to be a myth. The awareness raising campaigns hence targets EOTC members at different settings. As part of this awareness raising endeavour, different audio-visual materials are produced by associations and individual preachers which can be accessed for free⁷. There are numerous publications produced by Sunday schools and others accenting the very existence of the *Täbadiso* and the challenge the church is confronted with. One of such publication is the book entitled *Medlot Tsedq*,

.... the *Täbadiso* movement, has become a burning issue in the EOTC. It has touched almost all churches in both rural and urban areas. A number of writings are coming out by people inside the church. It has been more than 20 years since this movement has started. Though the Counter Reformation movement within the church has been an impediment, it has shown no indication of slowing down. There are more servants within the church who are being prepped for this. They are not yet revealed to the public. And their number is increasing through time. (Bekele Weldekidan in *Medlote Tsedq*, 2015)

The other strategy for sensitising the community of believers about the existence of *Täbadiso* was through publicly naming and shaming of associations and renowned individuals believed to have direct or an indirect link with the reformist group⁸. This includes providing a list of names of preachers, singers and renowned church officials believed to have links with the movement. The counter movement further lobbied to ban those suspected of having an ulterior motive of inscribing the *Täbadiso* teachings from attending any congregations held at EOTC and from attending any church services and demoting them from their official positions. This partly links to the aforementioned act of naming and shaming which is further pushed one step to delinking those suspects from having any affiliation with the church. This is described by informants as a quintessential act of protecting the potential damage to be caused.

The production of numerous audio-visual polemical teaching about the *Täbadiso* movements by renowned church clerics is another strategy used by the counter movement. The polemical teachings are recorded during religious congregations whereby the clerics target the central teachings of the reformist movement mentioned under section II above. As a way of informing the church community numerous parish churches have organised *gubae* (congregations) whereby they have invited clerics who are well known to the public and have a strong position against the *Täbadiso*. The preaching often accents the underlying similarity between the *Täbadiso* and the Protestants. The counter movement against *Täbadiso* assumes it to be an attempt to make the church protestant as stipulated in some of the changes the *Täbadiso* calls for. For example, those countering the *Täbadiso* movement mention that the call for the use of Amharic as an official church language is a phenomena that can be compared to Luther's dictum that, "the meaning of the bible has to be understood by everybody".

⁷ Some of this lectures available online are entitled: *ye tehadso mistr; Ethiopian Orthodox vs Tehadiso infidels No one deceive you; Tewabedo Vs Tebedeso - ተዋህዶ እና ተሐድሶ ፍጥጫ*

⁸ <http://www.topix.com/forum/world/ethiopia/T6O91BG5VB91TLI0B>

Though the decreasing number of EOTC followers is not presently considered a concern, it has been taken as a matter of preserving national identity, history and heritage by the counter movement. This is framed in such a way that followers of EOTC have the responsibility to take care of the church and pass it down to the next generation in the same manner as they took over from their forefathers. With such claims, Sunday schools have taken up part of the counter movement both as a conglomeration of individual followers and as one organisational structure of the church. As Sunday schools have been the focus of the *Täbadiso* movement, with this the need to claim the responsibility for the counter movement has accordingly been taken up by them. With the far reaching network and ability of Sunday schools, the counter movement has taken a different path in different Sunday schools. In some, a separate committee has been set to tackle this problem alone. In the southern part of Addis, a new initiative has been taken up by Sunday schools. Programmes have been prepared to create awareness among the public on *Täbadiso* movement by five Sunday schools forming a coalition against the *Täbadiso*. In some churches, these programmes are held in collaboration with the *Sebekka Guba'e* while in others it is only the Sunday school that took the responsibility. For a while, at Saint Joseph church Sunday school such programmes were only for invited guests and Sunday school members, where it was prepared in a shroud of secrecy. These programmes prepared by the Sunday schools had the objective of teaching about the tradition and cannon of the church, since the *Täbadiso* movement is changing, and destroying the teaching of EOTC. Furthermore, the programmes were organised as a way of preserving the church tradition; showing that Sunday schools can do more than “celebrating epiphany together” thus broadening the spectrum of the counter movement to a larger audience and aim; keeping members of the school updated about the *Täbadiso* movement; showing what is expected of every member of the church as a way of inculcating the message that everyone has the responsibility to take up in the reformist group. With this, besides forming a well-organised structured network to deal with the *Täbadiso* movement, the programmes are focused on relegating the task of opposing *Täbadiso* to every individual rather than an organisational battle, such as between *Mahibere Kidusan* and the *Täbadiso* group. In such a way, taking responsibility is a matter of being a follower rather than being a part of the organisational structure of the church. Following the initiative taken by the Sunday schools, it is in fact a recent phenomenon where church administrators have become open about the existence of the movement. Immersed in the fear of being fired from their position or being relocated to remote areas, some church administrators have for long shied away from condemning the movement or publicly speaking about its very existence.

Despite such multifaceted countering attempts informants emphasised the point that the church has been unable to tackle the problem of the reformist movement for several reasons. First, there is no well-established structure for such counter movements and all the aforementioned attempts are described to be uncentralised. Some informants further raise the point that the *Täbadiso* movement has been seen as a shield to keep power within the church. Last but not least, there are some informants who mention that there is a weak flow of information between structures in the church about the *Täbadiso* movement and its counter movement. For the *Täbadiso*, the ultimate goal of the reform movement is a reconstruction and rebuilding of the church while for those countering the movement, such as the *Mahibere Kidusan*, the objective of the movement is to destroy the church and establish a new one as presented in this section.

Conclusion

As it has been presented, the developments in and around the EOTC clearly shows the growing tension between the reformists and an aspiration to keep the old tradition of the church. The paper has further elucidated the point that any attempt to fully grasp contemporary reformist religious movements requires to be placed in the broader perspective as the EOTC has a long history of reformist movements or rather a number of waves of reform as presented briefly in this paper. The history of reformist zeal at the EOTC is thus complex and ambiguous. In this paper we argue that founding fathers of earlier reformist movements have influenced the more recent generations from where inspiration has been drawn.

The competing narratives between the reformist movement and those countering the reformist zeal are often framed in discourses of authenticity whereby time is described to be a legitimising variable of authenticity. The reformists argue in an anti-syncretic tone contesting what they call superstitious beliefs and acts injected into the old traditions of the church while the counter narrative to the reformist movement is an attempt to reform the 'old' and long standing traditions of the church.

Furthermore, as it has been discussed in this paper the local reformist movement within the EOTC is not at large framed within external poles of orientation but it is rather a movement that is formed by the local frame of conditions.

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The Impact of the Coalition of Pentecostalism and African Traditional Religion (ATR) Religious Artifacts in Zimbabwe: The Case of United Family International (UFI)

Nomatter Sande¹

Abstract

The rise of the mega- Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe has brought an overarching coalition of religious artifacts in its quest to engage with the private and public lives of many Zimbabweans. Adaptation to the unstable political and economic decline in Zimbabwe has led to some proliferation of complex, interwoven practices between Pentecostalism and African Traditional Religion. Intrinsic violence, manipulation, extortions, cunning miracles, misrepresentation of the Bible and an elusive rhetoric of prosperity are used to gain obedience of the suffering populace. Somewhat, an alliance of religious artifacts, expressions, identity, and meaning forms a new hybrid of African Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe. This article explores the social, economic, psychological and political meaning of these religious artifacts coalition. The article uses United Family International (UFI) as a case study. This study collected data through interviews and sermons analysis.

KEY WORDS: ATR, Pentecostalism, Coalition, Artifacts

Introduction

The socio-economic decline, poverty and laxity of the rule of law in Zimbabwe today have involuntarily led the desperate populace to have an insatiable yearning for, and seek solace from, a new spirituality. In the Zimbabwean economy, Pentecostalism has become a central issue in offering some solutions to these and other challenges bedeviling the nation. Pentecostalism is a brand of Christianity which places emphasis on miracles,

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works of the Holy Spirit and evokes Acts 2:8ff as the source of power.² Pentecostal churches have attracted masses of people resulting in mega-congregations in Zimbabwe. However, zeal for power, riches and flamboyance have caused tension within these mega churches leading to their continuous mushrooming and schisms. On the other hand, the desperation of the population, poverty and suffering have led to rampant deception, exploitation, and extortion, especially within the Pentecostal churches. Common in these churches are teachings on prosperity, blessing, and curses as well as the possibility of acquiring riches using divine and supernatural methods.

Such claims are both interesting and worrying as they are causes for a coalition religious artifacts. Pentecostalism enjoys a substantial glamor and celebration in Zimbabwe. However, a closer analysis of its liturgy, rituals, myths, and beliefs shows subtle inherent violence camouflaged in a coalition of artifacts with African Traditional Religion (ATR). For instance, the new wave of mega-Pentecostal churches has begun to integrate, evoke and prescribe enchantments, ornaments, oils and bangles just as the ATR practitioners do. Such overarching practices promote inter-religious artifacts coalition. For example, the Pentecostal clergy has been condemned for receiving supernatural powers from the underworld, foreign nations and traditional healers, a dimension under discussion in this article. This interplay increase by the crafty coercions exercised on, and hefty payments made to the Pentecostal clergy in the guise of receiving a blessing. It is against this backdrop this article explores the social, economic and political meaning of this religious artifacts coalition between Pentecostalism and ATR.

Methodology

This article uses key arguments and data collection from United Families International (UFI). The UFI is founded by Prophet Emmanuel and Ruth Makandiwa in May 2010, after breaking from the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFM). The UFI attracts large numbers of people to their services. Claims of the prophetic voice, healing and miracles have continued to heighten the public curiosity and attention of the media. This article refers Makandiwa as the Prophet, as ascribed by his followers.

The first data collection tool was through interviews. The total numbers of interviews were twenty-five UFI members using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a technique in which the researcher uses own judgment to choose the population.³ Six ordained pastors were interviewed to discuss the challenges their theological interpretations of some religious artifacts and the main issues addressed by the UFI. Eight lay-leaders functioning as (Cell Group leaders, Sunday school teacher and hospitality and decorations) were interviewed to understand how they perceive, appropriate and cascade the teaching from the Prophet. Eleven members without positions in the UFI were interviewed, to understand how the artifacts have worked for them.

The second data collection was through analyzing sermons preached by the prophet. Pieterse argues that sermons provide a platform for the initiation of disciplinary practices and technologies of the self that, to varying degrees of success, enable spiritual self-

² Philip Musoni, "African Pentecostalism and Sustainable Development: A Study On the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa, Forward in Faith Church," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 2,10 (2013), 75.

³Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research* (Wiley Online Library, 2005).

fashioning.⁴ Ten video sermons preached by the Prophet were analyzed. The sermons he preached at youth services, Judgement Night Conference, normal services at Chitungwiza sanctuary, business conference and deliverance. The sermons gleaned information which helped to understand teachings about blessings and curses.

Discourses on Pentecostalism and Public Space

Recently, there has been an increase of works about the of Pentecostalism in public space including the political voice and the socio-economic debates. Related context like Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Tanzania and Kenya brings critical ideas to this article. Marx Weber work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, frames answers for the relationship between religion and economics. The 'Protestant Ethic' are habits, ethics, and beliefs that sustained European Industrial Revolution economic growth. Afe Adogame focused his work, *Dealing with Local Satanic Technology: Deliverance Rhetoric in the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries*⁵ shows that in Nigerian during 1980-1990, the collapse of socio-economic and political paved a new Christian Pentecostal persuasions providing channels for venting frustrations and sources for solutions. Adogame questions the interconnectedness of religion to the declining economic and concludes that there exists a dialectical and interactive relationship between various ingredients of the social structure. He argues that church literature and 'sermon genres' are replete information about how beliefs structure shape and impact the society.

Paul Gifford article, *The Protestant Ethic and African Pentecostalism: A case study*⁶; reviews the 'Pentecostal Ethic' presents the case of an African Pentecostal Church, 'Winners Chapel.' It emphasizes 'victorious living' by using writing by David Oyedepo *Signs and Wonders Today: A Catalog of Amazing Acts of God among Men*, in 2006 and the testimonies contained in this book. He points out many pastors in African Pentecostalism uses 'victorious living' motif which they emphasize financial gain. In this article, the use of oil, the blood of Jesus, washing of feet and mantle forms power instruments to protect them. Birgit Meyer⁷ using Ghanaian context argue that Pentecostals reject government heritage politics. In Zimbabwe, David Maxwell⁸ explains that Pentecostals makes a total break with the past by exorcisms. However, Ruth Marshall works argue that "Pentecostalism is a paradox of difference and uniformity, of flow and closure that seem to be at the heart of processes of transnationalism and globalization."⁹ Kudzai Biri's work, *the silent echoing voice: aspects of Zimbabwean Pentecostalism and the quest for power, healing and miracles*¹⁰ contests the notion of 'total break from the past' through studying Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa and United Families International (UFI). She confirms that they both tape into the

⁴Jim Pieterse, "Managing belief in a hostile world: experiencing Gifts of the Spirit at a small Pentecostal Charismatic Church in Pretoria," *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 2016,5.

⁵ Afe Adogame, "Dealing with Local Satanic Technology: Deliverance Rhetoric in the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries," *Journal of World Christianity* 5, no. 1 (2012).

⁶ Paul Gifford and Trad Nogueira-Godsey, "The Protestant Ethic and African Pentecostalism: A Case Study," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 24, no. 1 (2011).

⁷ Birgit Meyer, "'Make a Complete Break with the Past.'Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse," *Journal of religion in Africa* 28, no. Fasc. 3 (1998).

⁸ David Maxwell, "'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?': Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe," *ibid*.

⁹ André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani, *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America* (Indiana University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Kudzai Biri, "The Silent Echoing Voice: Aspects of Zimbabwean Pentecostalism and the Quest for Power, Healing and Miracles," (2012).

Shona traditional culture to find the meaning of life. The literature review, taken together does not interrogate the social, economic, psychological and political meanings of the coalition of religious artifacts in Pentecostalism, a gap this article intends to fill.

Understanding Pentecostalism and schisms in Zimbabwe

This article does not go into the complex, historical and emergence of Pentecostalism debate, but uses a working definition by Musoni above. Musoni defines Pentecostalism as ‘a brand within Christianity which emphasizes charisma and works of the Holy Spirit. In the same vein, there is a contestation of the term ATR has for a long time. In this article, ATR is narrowed to mean the popular indigenous religions and cultures of the Shona people Zimbabwe. The large ethnic group in Zimbabwe is the Shona people. Over the past century, there has been a dramatic increase in appreciating that Pentecostalism has managed to satisfy its adherents in both spiritual and material needs putting them in the spotlight. As such, this is contrary to her counterparts like Catholicism and Mainline churches. Adherence of Pentecostalism views them as powerless and traditional.

However, recently, the church in Zimbabwe is blamed for political and economic instability, and there is an argument that leaders have lost God in pursuit of their glory and materialism.¹¹ The desire for glory and empire building attributes to the burgeoning of Pentecostal schisms. What is interesting and worrisome is that the productive young man aged between 22 and 40 purported to be causing these breakaways. During the escalating economic decline in Zimbabwe from 2009, young Pentecostal preachers surfaced on the scene with a ‘prophetic craze’ having miracles of varying levels of sophistication attributed to them.¹² This prophetic voice has made these churches to attract myriads of followers. Traditionally, the clergy was manned by the older adults, and this brings a question of why the sudden interest by the young productive generation. The church has become a lucrative business and a greener pasture in Zimbabwe, Southern Africa and beyond. Most of these ‘fly by night’ young preachers have no theological training, resulting in an inaccurate interpretation of the Bible. Literal translation and superficial selective reading of scriptures are used to justify their needs.

Although scholarship denies the existence of a religion which can be termed ‘new’ in religious circles; in the Zimbabwean context, the ‘new’ is about the divergent practices as compared to Classic Pentecostalism, which traces from America around 1900. The pioneers of Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe such as the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) and the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), Hear the Word Ministries, Family of God Ministries can be a benchmark for this comparison. In other words, this article distinguishes between the Zimbabwe New Pentecostal Movement (ZNPM) as ‘first generation Pentecostal breakaway churches’ from the existing charismatic or Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe. Examples fitting this category are the United Families International (UFI), Heartfelt International Ministries (HIM), Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministries (PHD) and Spirit Embassy Ministries. This article utilizes the UFI as a case study representing the ZNPM.

¹¹Andrew Nyamayaro, “False Prophets Misleading Nation,” *H-Metro*, April 20, 2016, 8.

¹²Ezra Chitando et al., 2013. “Back to the Future! A Reader on the Bible, Prophets and Profits in Zimbabwe.” In *Prophets, Profits and the Bible in Zimbabwe*, ed. Ezra Chitando et al. (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2013), 9.

Potential Coalition: The Nexus of Pentecostalism and ATR

There is a dialectical and ambiguous relationship between ATR and Pentecostalism. In Zimbabwe, ATR has been castigated, resisted and labeled sinful. Despite this concerted effort, ATR has remained resilient and interwoven in the fabric of Pentecostalism. The striking observation to emerge is the emphasis of Pentecostalism to break away from the 'past life' of its adherents. They base on the understanding that when one is in Christ, they are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5¹⁷). Anything that is traditional and indigenous is viewed negatively as causing, or being a source of demonic activity. In fact, Pentecostalism perceives Indigenous religions to be a demonic and cultural belief as the basis of evil. It is possible that discursive power and domination underlies the hegemonic tendencies utilized by Christianity in demonizing and relegating indigenous religion as evil. Since individuals coming from existing religions like ATR are converting to Christianity, it is likely that the believers use indigenous frames of analysis to interpret and map the physical and metaphysical world. It is at this point that Pentecostalism begins to borrow from the indigenous culture. Therefore, for ZNRM clergy to be abreast with miracles and demand for solutions to poverty and economic challenges in Zimbabwe, there is compromising of the inter-religious boundaries. The inter-religious conflict is toned down by forming a new coalition between Pentecostalism and ATR.

There is a need to understand further the various perceptions of Pentecostalism that exist in alignment and continued operation with ATR. To this, Mbiti explains that an African is notoriously religious, taking religion to the field, work and every aspect of their life¹³. The parasitic nature of Christianity is large since for it to appeal to many people in each society, it must situate itself in the belief system of the people and address problems in a manner acceptable to the people in question. Thus, this gives Christianity relevance in the Zimbabwean society. Consequently, the ZNPM has begun to integrate, evoke and prescribe enchantments, ornaments, oils and bangles just as the indigenous practitioners do best. These artifacts do not only bring similarities but a competition between religions to preserve ownership. Concomitantly, there is a condemnation of the Pentecostal clergy has for receiving supernatural powers from the underworld, foreign nations' traditional healers: a new coalition saga which deserves further investigation. There are still many unanswered questions about whether an African can convert to Christianity or not. There is a new scenario whereby practitioners of the indigenous religions are blending and operating like the Pentecostal churches and vice-versa. Interviews established that one known *n'anga* (witchdoctor) suddenly turns into a prophet when they come to Christianity. These ornaments are there to prevent the adherents from evil attacks. Such claims are not peculiar to ZNPM, but the traditional healers give their patients charms, oils and herbs for protection as well. These artifacts sell at a price in both cases.

Discussions

The purpose of this article was to explore the social, economic and political meaning of the coalition of the religious artifacts between Pentecostal and ATR in Zimbabwe. This section discusses the findings of the socio-economic and political meaning of the coalition of religious artifacts from UFI. It uses the emerging themes; *demonology, prosperity gospel, the idea of a man of God, total health, blessings and curses rhetoric and spiritual declarations*.

¹³John.S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969),1.

Demonology

Deliverance from all forms of evil spirits is a central theme in the clergy of the UFI. A notable incident is a yearly service done called 'Judgement Night.' (*Anonymous UFI Cell Group Leader*) says, "Judgement Night is for sentencing poverty, sickness and every evil from people's lives." Kakore argued that 175 000 members attended 2016 Judgement Night 4.¹⁴ The Prophet teaches that evil spirits cause poverty. Such belief makes people shift their focus on the economic decline but thinks they have demons/evil spirits. Thus, one reason why Zimbabweans are flocking to such gatherings is to answer the question concerning their sufferings and understand the source of the poverty and break it.

One of the tools used to destroy the evil spirit is the prophet picture/portrait. (*Testimony from UFI member*), explains that the portrait of Prophet delivered his son who had evil spirits. The meaning of the portrait paints an authoritarian and autocratic muscle on the Prophet. Nevertheless, the Prophet has been branded as a trickster using occult powers and charms to draw a crowd to UFI and performs dubious miracles.¹⁵ Occultic powers and charms are common among the Shona traditional religion. Chavhunduka argued that exorcisms are rampant among the Shona people especially those of the antisocial acts like *kuroya* (bewitching).¹⁶ It is difficult, therefore, to differentiate the source of the powers of the Prophet.

The impact of some exorcisms turns to be abusive in form. It is possible to call it 'soft violence' which is very traumatic. For instance, a bishop told a woman that her husband transmitted evil spirits to her through sex, he then performed rituals that allowed him to hypnotize, rape, and telling her to celebrate thanking God for using the bishop as an instrument for the ritual.¹⁷ The social meaning of such acts is not only criminal and offenses but results in HIV and AIDS and causing psycho-somatic depression.

Anointing oil is used to protect believers from demons/evil spirits. At the launch of anointing oil in Chitungwiza UFI church, Prophet explains that "The anointing oil unlocks all the doors of impossibilities in one's life, it lubricates a person's life, and things start to move smoothly."¹⁸ The use of oil icon brings an economic hope to the people, as they lubricate their economic vices. Nonetheless, on a broader perspective the use of oil suggests a people who are lazy and want handouts. Often they fall into the trap of losing property to the clergy only thinking that poverty is a curse, neglecting the lack of accountable leadership and good governance in Zimbabwe.

¹⁴ Nyemudzai Kakore, "Record Numbers at Judgement Night 4," <http://www.herald.co.zw/record-numbers-at-judgment-night-4/>.

¹⁵ The Telescope News, "Ghananian Pastors Planning to Visit President Mugabe to Expose and Get Makandiwa Church Banned," <http://iharare.co.zw/ghanaian-pastors-planning-to-visit-president-mugabe-to-expose-and-get-makandiwas-church-banned/>.

¹⁶ Gordon L Chavhunduka, "Traditional Medicine in Modern Zimbabwe," *Zimbabwe: University of Zimbabwe Publications 115p. ISBN 908307403* (1994).

¹⁷ Justin Sullivan, "An African Bishop Allegedly Hypnotizes Then Rapes Woman as Part of Exorcism Ritual," Inquisitr, <http://www.inquisitr.com/1912557/church-bishop-hypnotizes-rapes-woman-as-part-of-exorcism-ritual/>.

¹⁸ Tendai Rupapa and David Tshuma, "Thousands Queue for Makandiwa's Anointing Oil," <http://www.herald.co.zw/thousands-queue-for-makandiwas-anointing-oil/>.

Prosperity

Although there is the concept of prosperity within the Christian faith, the ‘prosperity gospel has become a trap to religious blackmail. The prosperity gospel is key in the UFI church. Some people accuse and challenge this gospel not to be correct. What is at stake is not the gospel per se, but how the clergy center everything on themselves other than God. There are different innovations to attract wealthy to the clergy, for example, UFI has rebranded Old Testament altars. Rose, female, teacher by profession and teaches Sunday School at UFI says:

I constructed a home altar and placed a small brown box at the corner of the room. I pray at that altar every day and makes a sacrifice. The sacrifice is the money or anything that they will give to church on Sunday which they put on the altar until Sunday. I either kneel or lie on the altar. And when I pay my tithe and get a receipt I can remind God at the altar that I pay tithes.

In an interview with an UFI member it was explained that “I seed to Prophet so that I become rich. The Prophet told us that he was sent by God to preach prosperity and I know *zvangu zvaita* (my things will work).” The impact of the ‘seed/seeding’ has made Prophet extremely rich. Prophets in Zimbabwe live lavish, materialistic extravagant lifestyles, and drive expensive cars such as Mercedes Benz S600, Bentley, and Lamborghinis.¹⁹ Such a celebrity life when the country is in poverty is questionable, after all not the whole UFI members are experiencing this life except the Prophet. The ‘giving’ in UFI is associated with sowing seed or seeding on fertile ground. The ‘fertile ground’ refers to church activities and mostly the man of God who is the Prophet. Biri and Togarasei argued that the prophets in Zimbabwe promise people that suffering would end if people would contribute to tithes and offerings.²⁰ In theological circles, there is a potential discrepancy when comparing this with the Jesus of the Bible. In significant instances, Jesus, did not hoard or amass material possessions but gave to the marginalized or found means of meeting their needs. Brinton argued that the religious persuaders use deception for people to believe, they compromise the truth telling lies to the persons they wish to persuade.²¹ On average, an African is not a reader of the bible or research on theological issues; most people in Zimbabwe rely on the preacher for their religious claims.

“I use anointed towels for many reasons to achieve something, for example; Prophet said you could wipe a car that you believe in buying and the anointing in the towel work wonders for you to get the car,” explains (*UFI Hospitality and Decorations Leader*). Such a statement suggests the impossibility of challenging the misconceptions, incorrectness, and untrustworthiness of how the UFI present the biblical discourses such as prosperity, blessings, and curses. It is in such a context that truth is blended and skewed, the clergy set aside selected texts making them preach what they want to achieve.

¹⁹ Obvious Vengei, "Zimbabwean Pentecostal Prophets," in *Prophets, Profits and the Bible in Zimbabwe Festschrifts for Aynos Masotcha Moyo*, ed. Ezra Chitando, Masiwa Ragies Gunda, and Joachim Kugler (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2013).

²⁰ Kudzai Biri and Lovemore Togarasei, "Back to the Future! A Reader on the Bible, Prophets and Profits in Zimbabwe," *ibid.*, ed. Masiwa Ragies Gunda and Joachim Kugler Ezra Chitando.

²¹ Alan Brinton, "St Augustine and the Problem of Deception in Religious Persuasion," *Religious Studies* 19, no. 04 (1983).

Idea of Man of God

In the guise of the prophetic mandate, trans-migrations to heaven, and manifestations of supra miracles, the abusive leaders attack their prey. Extreme religious loyalty has psychological meaning and implications and meaning. There are violence and abuses of some believers in the name of being loyal to the man of God. The UFI members use titles like Prophet and *papa* (father), and these seem to make the Prophet, a god. Nsubuga argued that pastor Paseka Motsoeneng claimed to have visited heaven during Easter, took a photo and is selling it for \$240.00 USD.²² Such transcendental entitlements sustain these abuses and violence.

There is the special branding of UFI followers whereby they are expected to wear bangles, and badges with inscriptions saying *ndiri mwana wemuporofita* (I am a son of a prophet). An Interview with UFI pastor's aged 62:

All I can say is people do not know much about the Prophet, he has his money and does not depend on people's money. People say he has a snake and other things because they do not know him at all, he is a father to us and is a man of God. Everything done in the UFI is prophetic, and if you listen, you will prosper. I am not a person who just goes anywhere, but in UFI I have found a home, father Prophet is very spiritual. UFI has its unique principles and characteristics in doing things. In a Christian walk, you need a spiritual father a mentor someone higher in the spiritual realm. Prophet Makandiwa is an all-rounder and touches marriage, business and old people.”

Findings from (UFI *youth meeting at Sports Center*), Prophet explains that the purpose we give you wristbands is for identity if you want to marry, do not look at everyone but find someone with a wristband. Psychologically these utterances and identification brainwash the youth, limits freedom of association, marital choice and create religious boundaries. Jane, 58, self-employed and UFI intercessor, declares that, “Prophet is my spiritual father, and we are sons and daughters, and we kneel to respect the anointing upon him.” Such dignity and reverence ascribed to the Prophet make one think twice when abused. The impact of the idea of a man of God opens the possibility of ‘ecstatic violence’ where the clergy abuse and rape the congregates using spiritual ecstasy. The clergy in Pentecostal churches claims to access, manipulate and interact with the supernatural. As such, believers are made to eat snake²³, drink petrol²⁴, and rape women.²⁵ Thus, the idea of the man of God exerts political power upon the believers as the man of God has outright control over them. A befitting example is what happened in Tanzania, where the pastor claimed that his feet should not touch the ground while

²² Jimmy Nsubuga, "Pastor Mocked for Trying to Sell Photos of 'Heaven' He Took on Smartphone," <http://metro.co.uk/2016/04/03/pastor-mocked-for-trying-to-sell-photos-of-heaven-he-took-on-smartphone-5792485/>.

²³ Jane Flanagan, "Pictured: The Shocking Moment a 'Miracle- Working Prophet' Fed Worshippers Live Snakes to Test Their Faith," <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3168202/Pictured-shocking-moment-miracle-working-prophet-fed-worshippers-LIVE-SNAKES-test-faith.htm>.

²⁴ Adenike Orenuga, "Controversial South African Pastor Give Church Members Petrol to Drink, Calls It 'Juice'," <http://dailypost.ng/2014/09/25/controversial-south-african-pastor-gives-church-members-petrol-drink-calls-juice/>.

²⁵ Sullivan.

preaching, so brothers in the church carried the pastor on their backs until the end of the service.²⁶

Prophet in (*sermon teaching*) says “Anyone who fights me will die because he is fighting God.” Such statements bring fear and make no room for believers to summon the Prophet to the courts of justice if anything wrong happens. For believers to drag such Prophet to the courts of law is viewed as attracting a curse on oneself. The clergy quickly evokes defensive biblical texts that silence any attempt to challenge them. They use appropriate scripture which pacifies and counsel those cheated or disgruntled by the clergy. Prominent texts such as the clergy are the apple of God’s eye are evoked, and anyone touching them are touching God are evoked (Zechariah 2⁸) The Bible itself discourages such acts of using circular courts to settle conflicts from the house of faith (1 Corinthians 6:5-6). If members question anything they do, they are labeled traitors. They quote the example of Tobias and Sanballat who opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 4:1ff). Sometimes they are referred as satanic agents. They hide in what they term, an encounter with God. It is the stance of many church leaders to hide from being questioned by saying 'you were not there when I had an encounter or experience with God.'

Total Health

Ayegboyin argued that healing is central to Pentecostalism.²⁷ (*Interview with UFI member*), “After being admitted to the hospital, I realized I had my wristband in my pocket, and I received healing the moment I wore it.” Another similar testimony from a mother confirms that “When I was desperate and did not have money to go to the hospital with my child, I wrapped a calendar with the picture of the Prophet I bought for \$2USD, and immediately my child recovered.” Shoko explained that the Shona people focus on health issues.²⁸ Charms, amulets and *madumwa* (talismans) are artifacts used by the Shona traditional healers for healing. Laying of hands, anointing oil and faith healings in the name of Jesus are a tool for healing in the Bible.²⁹

Chitando warned that it is important nowadays to think of whether miracles from prophets in Zimbabwe are real or not.³⁰ Some findings to emerge from this study is that pastors and lay-leaders of UFI have teachings spiced with supernatural notions and miracles of which some are known to be fake, and stage-managed. In Harare, Zimbabwe, UFI Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, and Walter Magaya charge as much as \$1500.00USD for contact meeting for those seeking spiritual solutions to their problems.³¹ Desperation opens a doorway for the deception of believers. The idea of a man of God in Zimbabwe questions whether they are shepherds, charlatans or business

²⁶ Pastor Must Not Touch the Ground Until End of Service See a new church in Tanzania, <http://www.nairaland.com/2916593/see-new-church-tzpastor-must>.

²⁷D Ayegboyin, "Dressed in Borrowed Robes: The Experience of New Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria," *Tradition and Compromises: Essays on the challenge of Pentecostalism*. Ibadan: Michael J Dempsey Centre (2004).

²⁸ Tabona Shoko and Dee Burck, "The Etiology of Evil in the Shona Traditional Religion," *Studies on Ethno-Medicine* 4, no. 2 (2010).

²⁹Fidelis Nkomazana and Abel Tabalaka, "Aspects of Healing Practices and Methods among Pentecostals in Botswana-Part 1," *BOLESWA: Journal of Theology, Religion and Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2009).

³⁰ Ezra Chitando, Masiiwa Ragies Gunda, and Joachim Kügler, *Prophets, Profits and the Bible in Zimbabwe: Festschrift for Aynos Masotcha Moyo*, vol. 12 (University of Bamberg Press, 2014).

³¹ Brian Chitemba and Desire Ncube, "Makandiwa and Magaya Charges Us\$1500 Per Person for 'Solutions'," <http://nehandaradio.com/2016/05/22/makandiwa-magaya-charge-us1500-per-person/>.

tycoons dressed in white collars? Despite these negative results, a significant number of believers continue to lose their hard-earned money, cars, houses, and businesses. What is rather disappointing is that the believers seem to be pacified, hypnotized and clueless of what is happening. It is difficult to explain this result, but it might be related to how the leaders brainwash their followers to the extent that they become very defensive and willing to protect the perpetrators. Gifford observed that in Pentecostalism physical healing is a critical component which also shows that health a sign of prosperity.³²

Blessing and Curses Rhetoric

In Zimbabwe, a popularized and oppressive teaching on blessing and curses has emerged in the economic meltdown context. An elusive and declaratory divine rhetoric is peddled within Pentecostal churches promising supernatural ways of achieving prosperity. To this, countless believers continue to lose their treasure to the clergy and leaders of these churches. Musoni echoed that Pentecostal in Zimbabwe attract believers like a 'hot potato' promising solutions to mitigate the here and now problems.³³

It shows that the discourse of 'blessing and curse' is a trump card for gullible behavior in Zimbabwe. The starting point is the attractiveness of both the concept of blessings; everyone wants them. On the other hand, a curse is a push factor causing fear; people want to escape them. What is fast becoming a key instrument for this gullibility in UFI today is a belief that the Prophet has both the power to 'bless' and 'curse.' The most important question to ask perhaps is how does one attract a curse or blessing? What is confusing is that the Prophet does not speak about the context of economic meltdown and political instability but rather of a cursed world we live, and God anointed him to solve this condition. It is this understanding that believers want to find favor and pay the clergy so that they can remove curses. For instance, during *Judgement Night 3* Prophet was anointed to bless believers though their tithes and seed for blessings, however, he also cursed three individuals during miracle service.³⁴

At the (*Judgement Night 4 Sermon*) the Prophet prescribes a solution for moving out the bondage to possess Canaan by willing to go through, spiritual warfare, "If you don't fight, stay as broke and as poor as you are." Other quoted Scripture (3 John1:2), Beloved; I wish above all things that you may prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers are used without proper exegesis and hermeneutical principles. Several elements are required and attached for one to receive a 'blessing.' Three or more words are normally used to describe one's failure to receive blessings such as faith, time, and doubt. Firstly, for one to receive a blessing they emphasize the need for one to give for the granting of the blessing. If one does not receive a blessing, they blame the believer for not raising their level of faith. When one does raise this faith level according to them they will find another excuse such as; it's not yet your season to receive a blessing, your time will come. Logically, the clergy never admits that it is their problem that people are not getting a blessing. Nevertheless, most of the followers after having given resources and sacrificed what they have, there is no assurance whether their lives will change. The Bible portrays the devil as an evil monster waiting to destroy the lives of believers as written in John

³² Gifford and Nogueira-Godsey.

³³ Phillip Musoni, "African Pentecostalism and Sustainable Development: A Study on the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa, Forward in Faith Church," *International journal of Humanities and social science invention* 2, no. 10 (2013).

³⁴ Moses Matenga, "Makandiwa Curses three people amidst miracle," <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2015/08/makandiwa-curses-three-people-amid-miracles/>.

10:10. Thus most of the clergy spend a considerable time creating, blaming and showing that the devil is withholding their blessings or that he cursed them. While on the other hand, this may be true, but the hands of the clergy are not clean as they capitalize on this for their gain. Today much of the devilish traits are visible in the behavior and actions of the clergy.

Spiritual Declarations

An analysis of the (*Prophet Sermon of Judgement Night 4*) shows the atmosphere where the Prophet makes declarations. As I observed, I noticed the expectation, zeal and the excitement of the people. As the prophets ascend to the podium, there are wild celebrations as if God Himself has manifested on earth. You hear jeering, whistling and shouting ‘papa’ becoming the audible sound in the context of wild and illogical celebrations. You cannot miss the prophet’s presence as he declares his word. With a short laugh and inviting more ‘Amen, say Amen repeatedly’ without even much having spoken, the crowd goes wild. The prophet is believed to be a custodian of divine oracles. Therefore, there is a portrayal of the whole service is as divine. As he utters the word, there is a passionate celebration, and at times you do not even hear what he would have said. His voice would vibrate due to the not up to the standard audio system and brings a sense of fear to the audience.

The declarations: the Prophet declared an anointing of ownership in people's lives and some would build seven houses. The prophet declares that: “My mission is to take people from one place to another. My mission is characterized by honey. Your marriage has to be sweet, your life, your health has to be sweet, *unobuda chete!! Ndati unobudachete!*(I said you are coming out).”

The art of sermon delivery had ululations and loud music that you even wonder what is the purpose of preaching. The stimuli are not exactly the message but the noise and excitement that exudes through the prophet voice and actions. In such an atmosphere, I realized that most believers would not be worried whether they are duped, or robbed all they want is to listen and do what the Prophet is saying because he stands in the position of God. (*An interview UFI member*), declares that Prophet is not mortal *munhu wemweya* (is a spiritual person) an embodiment of the divine.

As such, this shows how some members of UFI become oblivious to some negative issues with the Prophet. Makandiwa, the leader of UFI, has admitted to some clandestine land deals.³⁵ What happened to the story remains neither here nor there but he was acquitted. One would think that gullibility which results in citizens losing valuable property is criminals offense. Contrary to expectations, the government of Zimbabwe, police force, and state intelligence machinery seem to be dumbfounded as they stand aloof from these happenings. In Zimbabwe, religious beliefs coated with appealing artifacts are framing, deception, exploitation, and extortion. With much corruption, poverty, and economic decline in Zimbabwe even the clergy are finding their way out of litigation. Probably, it is difficult to employ the rule of law in this bizarre, twisted politico-economic context. It then follows necessarily that the spirituality is the entry point of gullible behavior. The multilayered, multidimensional complex socio-economic context has become the hatching ground for gullibility. Human beings are pattern-

³⁵ Moses Matenga, "Makandiwa Admits Land Impropriety," <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-7869-Makandiwa+admits+land+impropriety/news.aspx>.

seeking animals, and brains are set to seek and find patterns whether they are real or not.³⁶ Thus, a reiteration of a certain pattern such as ‘need of being wealthy’ or a ‘blessing’ in this context conditions the human mind on that pattern.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to explore the social, economic and political meaning of the religious artifacts in mega-Pentecostalism churches. Findings indicate that there is a coalition of religious artifacts between Pentecostalism and ATR forming a new hybrid of African Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe. The religious artifacts coalition manifest in demonology, healthy, and prosperity. Such complex and interwoven practices are attracting the suffering populace for alternative solutions. These artifacts have the social, economic, psychological and political impact. To maintain, appeal and be abreast of the needs of swelling adherence mega-pentecostal actors employ and display unpredictability, megalomania, and penchant for the delusional and ludicrous to lure their believers. The current findings add to a growing body of literature on the understanding of religion, peace, and conflict in contemporary.

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³⁶ Michael Shermer, "Smart People Believe Weird Things," *Skeptic* 10, no. 2 (2003).

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The Religious Framing of the South Sudanese Civil Wars: The Enduring Legacy of Ngundeng's Prophecy

Dereje Feyissa¹

Abstract

This article discusses how a religious idea informed the political behaviour of South Sudanese leaders in the context of civil wars and the associated bitter contest for leadership. The prophecy which is invoked in the leadership contest in South Sudan is the prophecy of the 19th century Nuer prophet, Ngundeng Bong believed to predicted the course and outcome of the South Sudanese civil wars. At the centre of the prophecy is the prophetic power claim by one of the major political figures in South Sudan, i.e., Dr. Riek Machar and his leadership contest first with Dr. John Garang and currently with President Salva Kiir. In making sense of Machar's self-understanding as a messiah, 'predicted' as it were by Ngundeng, the paper draws on the concept of political culture. It is argued that without endorsing Machar's prophetic claim, it is imperative to understand the claim structure and how it is made plausible in the eyes of the believers, including Machar's pragmatic mix of being a trained political strategist and a politician making use of a spiritual repertoire such as the enduring legacy of the Ngundeng prophecy featuring as a political capital.

KEY WORDS: Ngundeng Prophecy, Dr. Riek Machar, South Sudanese Civil Wars

Introduction

Politics have different dimensions, and certainly ideas matter in politics. This paper is about how a religious idea, specifically prophecy, has informed the political behaviour of South Sudanese leaders in the context of civil wars and the associated bitter contest for leadership. The prophecy which is invoked in the leadership contest in South Sudan is the prophecy of the 19th century Nuer prophet called Ngundeng Bong. It is widely believed not just by Nuer but by many non-Nuer South Sudanese that prophet Ngundeng predicted the nature, course and outcome of the various South Sudanese civil wars, including who would lead South Sudan to independence and deserved to be a

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legitimate leader of an independent and prosperous South Sudan. At the centre of the Ngundeng prophecy and its link with the South Sudanese civil wars is the prophetic power claim by one of the major political figures in South Sudan, i.e., Dr. Riek Machar and his leadership contest first with Dr. John Garang and currently with President Salva Kiir.

In making sense of Machar's self-understanding as a messiah, 'predicted' as it were by Ngundeng, the paper draws on the concept of political culture. Political culture is, "the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments which give order and meaning to a political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behavior in the political system". It encompasses both, "the political ideals and the operating norms of a polity" (Pye. 1968:218). As Hunt (1984:54) noted. "political symbols and rituals were not metaphors of power; they were the means and ends of power itself". Interpreting them and understanding how they are generated and how they work is thus of paramount importance. Political culture is thus the manifestation in aggregate form of the psychological and subjective dimension of politics. Prophecy is one of the major tenets of South Sudanese political culture in general and the Nuerin in particular; the country's second largest ethnic group and a major communal contender in the power struggle during the liberation movement and in independent South Sudan. As Afe Adogame noted for the nexus between religion and violence in his key note speech at the workshop "Religion and violence in contemporary Africa" on which this contribution is based, we need to pay attention to four interrelated issues: the religious concept, actors, arguments and symbols.² The religious concept refers to what aspect of religion is at play in a violent situation and type of concepts (religious or not) that emerge in a conflict that is considered to be religious. Actors refer to people (religious or not) involved in the conflict and who are using these religious concepts in what he calls religious outbidding, i.e., religious or political elites who try to outbid fellow competitors. Arguments are claims made by ideological actors in deploying the religious concepts. Symbols embed the violence-inducing religious idea or their interpretation as such.

The paper makes four interrelated arguments. First, it argues that prophecy constitutes the ideational structure of the South Sudanese civil wars and has been used to inform, animate and justify political action; as a basis of political legitimacy and mobilisation rhetoric. This partly explains why Machar has been so driven and determined to get the ultimate political prize, i.e., first to replace John Garang as the leader of the Sudan People Liberation Army (SPLA) and currently to take over the office of the presidency from his rival Salva Kiir. Understanding this presumed 'divine mandate' is important in making sense of the bitterness within which the leadership contest has been fought out at least since 1991 when factionalism had started within the SPLA. Second, the Ngundeng prophecy plays the role of a counter-hegemonic project, ironically one that harbours a hegemonic aspiration, i.e., while countering Dinka political elites' supremacist idea - the so-called Dinka domination of South Sudanese politics - Nuer political elites, mediated through the prophetic claim of Machar, also advance an ethnic divine mandate, the idea that South Sudanese political salvation could only come when it is led by a Nuer. Third, the political context for the salience of Ngundeng's prophecy is the prevailing sense of insecurity generated by half a century of civil wars, one that resonates with the 19th century colonial unrest of prophet Ngundeng's time. Here the continued relevance of Ngundeng's prophecy appears not only as political

²Afe Adogame, paper presented at the conference on "Religion and Violence", Addis Ababa, April 2016.

capital for Machar but also as a scheme of political interpretation and a project of hope for his followers. Fourth, the salience of the Ngundeng prophecy is also related to its ambiguity similar with the inherent ambiguity of religious texts and ideas that are open to (re)interpretation in changing socio-political contexts. Recent historical research on prophets has argued that prophets should be distinguished from their prophecies in that the latter are subject to "continual rediscovery" or reinterpretation not only about their meaning in the past but regarding their use as "explanations of the present" or "visions of the future" (Anderson and Johnson 1995: 1). People connect the past and the present through prophecies, which then ensured the "correctness" of their experience of current conflicts. However, this suggests that such revised interpretation of prophecies can also shape the reality of conflict.

The empirical base of the paper comes from various sources: the ethnographic fieldwork the author has made among the Ethiopian Nuer in the Gambella region since 2000; the interviews that the author made with Riek Machar and other leading Nuer political leaders in Gambella, South Sudan and Nairobi, online sources (how the relevance of the Ngundeng prophecy is debated in social media), and consultation of the major works of Douglas Johnson and Sharon Hutchinson as they relate to the Ngundeng prophecy.

The discussion in the paper is structured into five sections. Section one introduces South Sudan as a land of prophets with a focus on the greatest of all South Sudanese prophets – Ngundeng Bong. Section two examines the link between the Ngundeng prophecy and the South Sudanese civil wars in reference to the leadership contest between John Garang and Riek Machar from 1991 – 2005. Section three examines how the Ngundeng prophecy played out in the ongoing leadership contest between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar since December 2013. Section four discusses how the Ngundeng prophecy was deployed as a counter-hegemonic project referring to the discourse of Denka domination of the South Sudanese state. It is however noted that Ngundengism, as its critics would call it, also harbours a hegemonic aspiration so long as it promotes the ideology of a divine ethnic mandate for the Nuer to be rulers of South Sudan. Section five concludes with a reflection on how prophecy features in South Sudanese civil wars not only diagnostically but also in its prognosis, i.e., it explains in part how intransigence has undermined the search for a sustainable peace for the troubled South Sudan.

South Sudan: The Land of Prophets

Prophecy is a deeply felt value that informs the religiosity of many of South Sudanese societies. This is certainly the case for Nilotic societies, particularly the Dinka and the Nuer, the country's two major ethnic groups. There is Ngundeng Bong, Wutnynag, Dak Kueth, Dengdit and Nyachol of Nuer and Dengdit of Bar El gazel, Abraham Chol and many others. Of the various Nilotic societies prophecy is most deeply rooted among the Nuer.

Nuer prophets are said to be 'seized' (*kap*) by divinities (*kuoth*, pl. *kuuth*) and are called *gok kuoth* (vessels of *kuoth*) or *gwan kuoth* (owners of *kuoth*) in the Nuer language (Evans-Prichard 1940). However, in other contexts, they are known as *yoong* (fools, crazy men, sing. *yong*). During the early colonial era in Sudan, Nuer prophets were viewed as "witchdoctors" or "magicians". They were also often called *kujur* in colloquial Arabic by the colonial government, who recognised them as being leaders who opposed colonial

rule. Thus, many *kujurs* were harshly attacked by the colonial government (Hashimoto, 2013). During the time of Sudan's two civil wars, some Nuer prophets were "politically aware" of the modern situation (Johnson 1994: 309) and they tried to maintain peace in the community by forbidding inter-communal fighting and criticising people for depending on UN food relief (e.g., Hutchinson 1996: 338-348). Nuer prophets maintained their role as bringers of peace to the community despite external interference. Their peace-making power is thought to come from their ability to interpret the prophecies of the most prominent prophet, Ngundeng Bong, who died in 1906. Ngundeng is widely considered as the greatest of all South Sudanese prophets and the most celebrated of all the prophets. He is believed to have been possessed by the divinity of Deng, the greatest of all divinities of the Nilotes with the power of life and death (Hutchinson, 2007). The prophecies of Ngundeng have been reinterpreted in the current context. Ngundeng composed many songs, and these songs and his legendary behaviour are now regarded as having prophetic value. Ngundeng's legacy has had a major influence on subsequent prophets, including the contemporary Nuer prophet, Dak Kueth. It is said that Dak has been 'seized' by the divinity of Ngundeng.

Ngundeng had a sacred genealogy. His father, Bong Can, was a *kuar muon* ('earth-master' or 'leopard skin chief'). Earth priests are a clan of indigenous spiritual leaders, who are responsible for purifying slayers who have committed acts of inter-Nuer homicide, and more generally for supporting the peaceful resolution of local feuds and fights. Ngundeng literally means 'gift of Deng', named as such due to the peculiar circumstances surrounding his birth. Nyayiel, Ngundeng's mother, is believed to be an old woman who was well beyond the age of conception. Speaking with the voice of Deng through his songs and prayers Ngundeng enunciated a social philosophy of peace which condemned inter-Nuer feuds and raids against the Nuer's neighbours. In fact, in his book, *Nuer Prophets*, Douglas Johnson (1997) calls Ngundeng a prophet of peace. Ngundeng's prophecy and link with divinity is stored not only in the various songs but also symbols. One of these religious symbols is *Bieb*, popularly called Ngundeng's "pyramid". Ngundeng built a large conical earth mound at Weideang as a symbol of conquest for the epidemic that plagued South Sudan in the late 19th century. *Bieb* has attracted visitors from far and wide (ibid). Among the sacred objects Ngundeng used in his rites were *tony* (a brass pipe), *bull* (a small drum), *Jiop Naath* (axe) and the *dang* (a ceremonial stick or 'rod').

Ngundeng spearheaded the resistance against British colonial rule in the Nuer areas. The British administrators had to take *dang* for fear that it was his source of power. His son, Gwek, followed suit and died while fighting the British in 1926 (Johnson 1997). All subsequent Nuer prophets have modelled on Ngundeng and mimicked his prophetic practices. They have also sought to acquire his sacred relics. Wutnyang, a prominent Nuer prophet in the early 1990s, for instance, was inspired by Ngundeng and he sought to acquire his divine relics (*jiop naath*) that are believed to have been buried in Rawmenyang, in Itang district of the Gambella region in Ethiopia in 1992 (Dereje 2011). As the discussion in section three shows Macha has also devoted great effort to acquire Ngundeng's relics, as was the case with the *Dang* in 2009 upon its return from England after 80 years.

Various scholars have examined the role of Nuer prophets as peacemakers or conflict actors or both. Douglas Johnson (1997) argues that Nuer prophets were first and foremost peacemakers and overseers of a moral community. They served the same role as the Leopard Skin Chief that Evans-Pritchard described in the 1930s but appealed to a

larger pan-tribal constituency. According to Johnson, prophets protected their people against crop failure, disease and infertility. He shows how Ngundeng could organise the Nuer and the Dinka by appropriating their gods and forming a pantheon under Deng. In their discussion of contemporary Nuer prophets Hutchinson and Pendle (2015), on the other hand, argue that the Ngundeng prophecy can be invoked both in justifying violence or promoting inter-ethnic peace. They have demonstrated this through analysis of two powerful living Nuer prophets - Gatdeang Dit and Nyachol. Accordingly, Gatdeang Dit rejects all forms of violent aggression and fosters relations of peace and intermarriage with Dinka neighbours. Nyachol, on the other hand, inspires thousands of armed Nuer youth to retaliate against Dinka cattle raiders and other external threats while insisting on purification for Nuer–Nuer homicide. This paper focuses specifically on how Ngundeng prophecy is implicated in the South Sudanese civil wars. This is evident in the belief that Ngundeng predicted the Sudanese civil wars and the eventual independence of South Sudan; the influx of massive South Sudanese refugees into Gambella (Ethiopia); the tragic death of John Garang, the current (“final”) civil war, the coming of foreign troops to South Sudan and its ultimate political salvation when a Nuer becomes the president of South Sudan.

In some of the songs Ngundeng even predicted specific events such as the *Wii Wal* prophecy; the enlargement of South Sudanese traditional three provinces (Bhar Gazal, Upper Nile and Equatoria) into ten states (materialised in 1993) and the return of his *dang*. *Mi ciao thuok ke ruac noonge dangan mac thok eni nyuura*, “if you have finished with the talks (debates) bring my dang”, a prophecy which materialised in 2009. Elders say the timing of the return of *dang* was in accordance with this prediction. The talks could be the Niavasha peace talks in Kenya. Others say it could be the debates during the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). But they all agree that the return of *dang* symbolises the return of the Nuer/South Sudanese power, which they said was lost since the 1920s. The Ngundeng prophecy has gained such a political prominence among South Sudanese refugees in Kenya where there is the so-called Mini-August session at Simmers Restaurant in Nairobi central business district made up of Ngundeng Scholars nearly every day.³ These discussants comprises of middle age South Sudanese historians and intellectuals giving in-depth analyses to the current political crisis in a sober and decorous manner testifying the fulfilment of the Ngundeng prophecy including the ongoing civil war since 2013. Some Nuer I talked to even read the Nuer massacre at Juba at the outset of the current civil war in the following verse of the Ngundeng song:

laatde je ciet ka mi ca bi ranth
cango wa mar ro we mar ni thaar Bieh ka a ba wa toom

Loosely translates, “Let people talk about it as if it will not come to pass; when it explodes under Bieh it will have a very loud sound; the very day it will explode around Bieh it will have a very huge sound”. In Ngundeng songs the term *Bieh* is used not only to refer to his capital but also any major administrative centre, in this case Juba. After prophesying a great deal of suffering and internal fighting among South Sudanese, Ngundeng finally predicted a unified South Sudan under a loving and caring leadership. He predicted a united people of South Sudan, happy and who do not recognise themselves based on tribalism or the practice of tribalism. It is not yet clear whether this predicted unity is supposed to happen before or after independence. In his songs

³ <https://paanluelwel.com/2016/07/23/in-south-sudan-ngundengism-is-almost-the-equivalent-of-marxism-in-the-west/>.

Ngundeng said, *“Cia ben pal gaat ka diaal e nga bi nga ngico, cang ni Ngok bike toang cuare dual ke beri marol; gueth ce jany ke ram kel ce bi yic ni bow; jiok nyal yith tung de puar; ci gueth jany ke rol mac ce bi yic ni bow; jiok nyal yith tung de puar.”* This translates: “You have all come together, praying together all my children without bothering to know who is who; even the Ngok will participate in the building (of the nation); don’t be afraid of Jalaba’s flags; the power has been in one person, but this will not be too confusing for the world (nation?); my coloured bull’s long horns reach to the skies; the power has lasted long with Jalaba, but will not be too confusing for the world; my coloured bull’s long horns reach to the skies.”

The enduring legacy of Ngundeng and his prophecy is also evident in the emergence of the Ngundeng Church, a syncretic religiosity between the Nuer indigenous religion centred on the Ngundeng prophecy and Christianity. Although there are many Nuer Christian sceptics regarding the relevance of the Ngundeng prophecy many also not only relate to it but also fuse it with Christian prophecy.

The Ngundeng Prophecy About the Leadership Contest Between John Garang and Riek Machar (1991 – 2005)

John Garang led the SPLA with an iron fist from its inception in 1983 until his tragic death in 2005, shortly after the historic peace agreement, the so-called Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between himself and Omar Al-Bashir, president of Sudan. Admired by some as one of the charismatic liberation movements in Africa others deeply resent the undemocratic way he led the SPLA. The call for political reform within the SPLA peaked in the late 1980s (Nyaba 1996). Reinforced by the loss of SPLA’s major backer president Mengistu Hailemariam of Ethiopia in 1991 after he was ousted by a coalition of ethnic-based liberation movements – the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) it ultimately led to a splinter group under the leadership of Machar. Allied with other major political leaders of the SPLA such as Lam Akol, Machar called his faction SPLA-Nassir. On his part Garang named his faction SPLA-Torit or SPLA mainstream. The two SPLA factions became involved in one of the bloodiest, what Hutchinson (2005) called, “South-on South civil war”. SPLA-Nassir launched a major attack on Bor, the hometown of Garang indiscriminately killing thousands of civilian Dinka (Nyaba, *ibid*). Garang’s SPLA Mainstream retaliated by doing the same against civilian Nuer population. Based in the Upper Nile region of South Sudan where most of the Nuer live, Garang’s retaliatory act helped Machar to frame the power struggle between the two factions in ethnic terms – an overarching frame which has ethnicised the civil wars in South Sudan ever since; as if the conflict is an identity conflict between the Dinka and the Nuer. As Machar lost some of his major non-Nuer allies he was drawn into a Nuer constituency as his major power base. This politico-military strategy is abetted by the cross-border settlement of the Nuer across the Gambella region of western Ethiopia where the Nuer also constitute an ethnic majority. It is in this political and military context that Machar probably gave a serious thought to tap into the Ngundeng prophecy as a political capital.

SPLA’s factional politics also had an ideological dimension. In fact, one of the major political differences between Garang and Machar was in defining the objective of the South Sudanese Liberation Movement. Garang advanced the idea of New Sudan – the

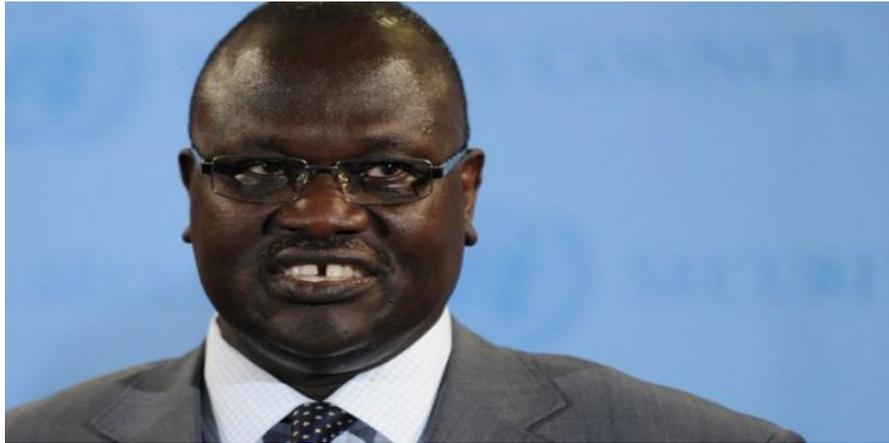
vision of a united and democratic Sudan.⁴ For Garang, the South Sudanese Liberation Movement should ultimately liberate the whole of the Sudan under his leadership. Machar challenged the feasibility and desirability of the politics of unity. Instead he championed the politics of secession. In so doing, he might have drawn on the largely Nuer-based South Sudanese Liberation Movement called Anyanya II which clearly articulated succession as the objective of the South Sudanese Liberation Movement (Belete 2013; Dereje 2015). But it seems Machar might have also found a religious justification for the politics of secession in some of the Ngundeng's songs. The verse in the Ngundeng song which is at the centre of Machar's prophetic power claim and a justification for his ideological position on the political future of South Sudan was the following: *ca beera da mat kena ber roal'* (my flag cannot be combined with that of (roal) Arabs). According to the Ngundeng prophecy, Garang was just fighting something bigger than him. Ngundeng centres his message about a bearded man he terms "*Tikyualknoth*" who will lead his people but his fire is going to blast: *Tikyual kouth da bi mac da bool*. The full version of the song further throws light on Machar's prophetic power claim and a justification for him being 'on the right side of history' with his ideological correctness:

Wars would be fought and a large country [Sudan] would split into two. A heavily bearded man would relinquish power and a left-handed Nuer would raise a new flag of an independent country.

With the privilege of hind sight Machar and his followers feel they are historically vindicated when South Sudan became an independent country in 2011. The ideological orientation of Machar was explicitly stated in one of the political organisations that he set up – the South Sudan Independence Movement (SSIM). Machar's SSIM tried to justify its actions by claiming that they were the fulfilment of Ngundeng's prophecies (Johnson 2014). Notwithstanding his opportunistic alliances and peace agreements with Khartoum, such as the 1996 infamous Khartoum peace agreement, Machar often justified his power bid as the 'chosen leader' given his consistent adherence to the politics of secession as opposed to Garang's politics of unity. By 2000 Machar's fall out with Khartoum became solid and he made a rapprochement with Garang, hoping that he could still advance the politics of secession within SPLA. That he was promoted to the third man position after Garang and his deputy Salva Kiir despite the tactical alliance he made with Khartoum was crucial for his power claim after the tragic death of Garang in 2005.

A second important verse in the Ngundeng song is the identification of the characteristic features of the person who would replace the "bearded man", i.e., Garang: "A heavily bearded man would relinquish power and a left-handed Nuer would raise a new flag of an independent country". In other versions of the song additional physical features and attributes of that person are mentioned: a Nuer without the tribal mark (*gar*); gapped teeth; a descendant of a spiritual authority (Teny), and one who married a white woman. Machar appears to be a perfect candidate for Ngundeng's ideal typical ruler of South Sudan. He is left-handed. He does not carry the Nuer tribal mark in his forehead. His grandfather's name is Teny, the Western Nuer prophet who was Ngundeng's contemporary. And finally, Machar was married to Emma McCune in 1991 shortly after he split with Garang; an expatriate British aid worker in South Sudan and died in 1993.

⁴ <https://paanluwel.com/2011/07/24/dr-john-garangs-1987-heritage-interview-with-arop-madut/>.



Riek Machar appearing without the Nuer tribal mark and a gap in his frontal teeth⁵

From his split with Garang in 1991 and his rejoining of the SPLA in 2002 Machar followed various political and military strategies – from ethnicising factional politics, seeking tactical alliance with Khartoum, to tapping into the Ngundeng prophecy. As Hutchinson noted:

Machar turned to indigenous prophets in the hope of boosting his political legitimacy. He benefited indirectly from well-known passages of Ngundeng's songs, which predicted that a "left-handed", "unsacrificed" Nuer man would play a decisive role in the military fight against northern domination. The fact that Machar's paternal grandfather had achieved regional prominence as a prophet of the divinity of Teny strengthened this spiritual association in the eyes of some supporters (Hutchinson, 2005)

Machar even entertained the possibility and political desirability of assuming the office of a *kuaar muon* (earth priest):

At one point Machar, who is a baptized Presbyterian, attempted to achieve the status of a *Kuaar muon* [...] The spiritual leaders whom Machar approached with this request however rejected it. They respectfully informed Machar that this was primarily an inherited position, which would be inappropriate for him to assume (Hutchinson, *ibid.* p.38).

Machar also enlisted the personal support of a charismatic Lak Nuer prophet called Wutnyang Gatakek shortly after his 1991 split with Garang. Wutnyang, inspired by Ngundeng and his prophetic practices, was also a military leader. He raised a formidable military force, also called the White Army that briefly took control over the town of Malakal in 1992. Wutnyang also sought to acquire Ngundeng's relics believed to have been deposited at Rawmenyang, a village in Itang district in Gambella where he clashed with Ethiopian government forces (Dereje 2011). Wutnyang finally returned to his home town at Peak in central Upper Nile where he built a large pyramid imitating Ngundeng's *Bieb*. Similarly, local SSIM personnel regularly sought advice about the optimal timing of their raid against the Dinka from another famous Nuer prophet Gatluak Yieh in the late 1990s (*ibid.*: 46). There was also a high-level rumour circulating that the baton carried by

⁵ <http://www.france24.com/en/20131217-south-sudan-riek-machar-rebel-statesman-coup-leader>

Garang was magically powerful and would tell which food was poisoned and which one was safe for the leader to feast on.⁶

The Ngundeng prophecy and the South Sudanese civil war – the leadership contest between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar (2005 to the present)

As ‘predicted’ by Ngundeng, Garang died after a tragic helicopter crash in 2005. Salva Kiir became the new leader of SPLA and Riek Machar his deputy. Despite Kiir’s so-called “Big tent’ policy meant to foster reconciliation and political reintegration, the different factions within the SPLA remained factions. From the start, the two never got along and rather used the CPA period (2005 – 2010) to consolidate their respective power positions (BICC, 2016). New additions to Ngundeng’s prophecy assumed public prominence, as some of the older versions were found not to be realistic, such as, “a left-handed man will raise the flag”, as it was Salva Kiir, the bearded man, not Riek the left-handed, who became the president of an independent South Sudan in 2011. One of these additions is: “*Riek da ba totd raar ka Jiom ba ruac da riet*”, which means, “a person by the name Riek will lead his people into prosperity and peace” but warned after the “Mac of *tikyual kuotb*”, the greatest of all and the final war. The ongoing deadly confrontation between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar since December 2013 is believed to be the fulfilment of the Ngundeng prophecy.

Upon the tragic death of Garang, Machar was promoted as the second person within the SPLA leadership and jointly with Kiir presided over the CPA period (2005 – 2010). The relationship between Kiir and Machar had been fraught with tension from the start⁷; a tension which quickly grew in the events leading to the 2011 referendum and the issue of a power struggle in independent South Sudan following the result of the referendum according to which the overwhelming majority of South Sudanese voted to be independent. Salva Kiir become the president and Machar the first vice-president of independent South Sudan.

Tension peaked in June 2013 when Kiir dismissed Machar from his position as First Vice President⁸ regarding the controversy surrounding the planned SPLA convention in December 2013. Kiir accused Machar and other senior members of his government of plotting a coup, an accusation which Machar dismissed as unfounded. The tension escalated when military forces loyal to Kiir clashed with the forces of Machar quickly leading to what is now called the Nuer massacre in the nation’s capital Juba. Machar and his allies fled from Juba and formed what has come to be known as SPLA-IO (SPLA in Opposition). This was followed by a deadly military confrontation between the forces allied with President Kiir and the SPLA-IO under the leadership of Machar. When it became clear that the SPLA-IO would prevail over the forces of Kiir President Museveni of Uganda sent in his troops to ostensibly protect Ugandan interests in South Sudan but also to rescue Kiir from his beleaguered position. A stalemate then ensued allowing the Addis Ababa-based regional block IGAD (Inter Governmental Authority for Development) to embark on the protracted peace process.

After nearly two years of a relentless peace process that also involved the

⁶ <http://martingarang.blogspot.com/2014/02/my-god-and-my-militant-rights-games.html>.

⁷ Daniel Wuor Joak. Major causes of the current conflict in South Sudan. <http://www.nyamile.com/major-causes-of-the-current-conflict-in-south-sudan/>.

international community the two factions finally concluded a peace agreement in August 2015. However, the implementation of this peace agreement was derailed by yet another eight months during which both factions violated the peace agreement and continued military clashes. After a concentrated pressure by the AU, IGAD and the international community it appeared both factions became ready to give peace a chance when they formed a Government of National Unity in April 2016. The Government of National Unity has however proved to be short-lived when another round of war broke out between forces loyal to Kiir and the SPLA-IO in Juba in July 2016. This time around Kiir outmaneuvered Machar by persuading senior political leaders from Machar's side to switch sides and join him, including Taban Deng, Machar's chief negotiator throughout the conflict since December 2013. Taban Deng ultimately replaced Machar as the FVP. It appeared that Machar's days were numbered when neighbouring countries endorsed the government of Kiir and recognised Taban Deng as the new FVP. Machar however has been proved to be resilient still leading a rebellion against Kiir's government, active mainly in the Upper Nile region. As in previous factional politics the confrontation between Kiir and Machar has also been interpreted with reference to the Ngundeng prophecy. In his song Ngundeng talked of a leader called 'Kiir Nyal Diing' who would lead South Sudan. Elders say it is Salva Kiir Mayardit. The name 'Kiir' would match the first name of the current president of South Sudan, but 'Nyal Diing' is probably a nick name describing Kiir – names of many dotted colours, "Kiir of many colours". Ngundeng said this Kiir will one day bring, probably bad news, to his people when he said "*Kiir Nyal Dieng be ba juoclom*" Ngundeng also said, "*Tikyualkuoth bi mac de bool*" – the flames of fire of God's long bearded man shall be widespread – some elders say it is Garang with reference to the 21 years of bitter wars. Others say it is Salva Kiir.

The failure of Machar's breakaway movement notwithstanding, after the signing of the CPA in 2005 and Machar's accidental elevation to the position of vice presidency following Garang's death, many of his followers continued to claim that Machar would be the fulfilment of the alleged Ngundeng prophecies predicting an independent South Sudan and a Nuer ruler. Machar is a baptised Presbyterian but has been proved to be playful with his divine mandate to rule an independent and prosperous South Sudan. In an interview that I had with him in his Nairobi 'tent court' in 2002, I asked Machar whether he believes in Ngundeng's prophecies. He admired Ngundeng for his "accurate" predictions of the political future of South Sudan. Instead of answering my question head on as 'yes' or 'no' Machar replied, "I am a Nuer and I respect Nuer culture, and Ngundeng prophecy is an important part of Nuer culture". In a recent interview, Machar has spoken out more clearly about Ngundeng's prophecy, including the ongoing leadership contest between him and Salva Kiir:

Ngundeng mentioned almost everything happening today. Even the war we are fighting with Kiir Nyaldiing [this is how Salva Kiir is believed to have been mentioned in Ngundeng song] was taught to us since we were young boys by our fathers. This war is Tick yual Kuothpiny war. I knew I was not to die without this happening. We count the years. We know every turn of the history. Almost all the old men in this village knew that this is the last war among South Sudanese and SalvaKiir will be conquered.⁸

More importantly Machar has sought to acquire Ngundeng's relics, particularly the *dang*, the sacred object identified with power. After Ngundeng died his son Guek claimed to

⁸ <http://www.nyamile.com/2015/07/27/dr-riek-machar-the-great-ideologies-debater/>.

be seized by Deng and took possession of his father's relics, including the *dang*. Guek came into conflict with the British and was killed in 1929 and Ngundeng's relics were taken as trophies by British officers. The tony and the bull were eventually housed in the Ethnographic Museum in Khartoum and restored to the Lou Nuer by presidential order in 1978 (Johnson 2014)⁹. They have been kept safe by Ngundeng's descendants living near Weideang ever since. Originally, it was thought by the historian Douglas Johnson, that the *dang* was to return to its rightful owners – the descendants of Ngundeng or at least to be stored in a South Sudanese national museum. It inadvertently fell into the hands of Machar in 2009. The return of the *dang* was predicted by Ngundeng and what happened in 2009 is considered as the fulfilment of his prophecy.

At any rate that *dang* was returned in late 2009 and was symbolically important for Machar, as this was a time when he was positioning himself in the impending post-CPA leadership contest with his rival Kir.



*Machar euphorically holding Ngundeng's dang upon its return in 2009*¹⁰

Machar's actions have politicised the *dang* to such an extent that it has ceased to be considered a national historic relic. Since the new outbreak of war in South Sudan there have been reports that Machar continues to use the *dang* as a religious object to solidify a sense of Nuer entitlement and unity behind his own aspirations (Johnson, 2009). Machar held various ceremonies with the *dang* to generate political loyalty among powerful Nuer militia leaders between 2010 until his rebellion in 2013. That the return of *dang* was predicted by Ngundeng has lent greater political legitimacy to Machar's power claim. Machar made a speech that highlighted its historic moment:

Ngundeng had foretold the emergence of an independent southern Sudan and the coming referendum. It was no coincidence that the *dang* was returned on the 16th of May, the anniversary of the beginning of the revolution against the north, now National Day in South Sudan (Johnson 2014).

¹⁰ Douglas Johnson. "The fate of Ngundeng's dang". <http://riftvalley.net/news/fate-ngundeng>.

While Machar celebrated the return of the *dang* by sacrificing a cow, already at Juba international airport, and signalled his personal ownership, his rival Salva Kiir was ambivalent – while acknowledging the historical importance of the return of *dang* and its symbolism for the South Sudanese Liberation Movement he also expressed concern that it might be used (by Machar?) for malevolent reasons and that ownership of the historical relic belongs to the people of South Sudan housed within a national museum:

The *dang* has been returned from United Kingdom to Juba on the historic day of the 16th May, the day when the liberation war started. The return of this holy artifact is a victory to our people as it symbolized the resistance of our people, particularly our traditional leaders [...]. Although this holy *dang* was used for war, we will urge our Nuer traditional leaders to use it for promoting peace and unity among our people.... We will keep it as an important national artifact for our national museum. I direct our Ministry of Sports and Culture to make the necessary arrangements in consultation with Nuer community to preserve this important national artifact. (ibid)

Besides, Machar has currently enlisted the active support of a famous Nuer prophet called Dak Kueth. Like the prophets before him such as Wutnyang, Dak also derives his powers from Ngundeng's prophecies (Hashimoto: 39). In fact, it is said that Dak has been 'seized' by the divinity of Ngundeng. Dak is thought to have incited several White Army soldiers to attack the Murle. He built on Ngundeng's prophecy that mentions, "Murle and Bor, just wait until I solve the problem with the Arabs. Then I will return to you." That means, after independence is achieved, problems with the Murle and Bor (Denka) will occur. In allying with Dak Machar finds a mythological articulation between Ngundeng's prophecy about his 'eventual' triumph over Kiir and the 'inevitable' war between the Nuer and the Dinka.



A photo of Machar with Prophet Dak Kueth at his headquarter Fagak¹¹

Machar is not alone in being playful with his divine image. Some SPLA soldiers at the front-line became spiritual with the intention to survive attacks, and military advances toward the enemy. There were, for instance, SPLA soldiers who bragged of their purchased powers from local medicine-men, spear-masters and seers. The powers they received were thought to render bullets powerless in the event of shoot outs. No

¹¹ <https://paanluelwel.com/2016/08/05/what-is-the-legacy-of-dr-riek-machar-in-the-history-of-south-sudan/>.

force made it more explicit than the famous Mobile Task Force. This amalgam was a tactical response special unit called upon when the swiftest fire power was needed on a particular front. It was said to have been made up of soldiers with impenetrable bodies - kind of bullet-proofed skins (Aher 2014). Salva Kiir is also rumoured to possess certain powers that would make him escape any attack deemed to kill everyone. In early 1990s when he was involved in a plane crash in Western Kenya and walked away unscathed, the rumour nearly became a certainty.¹²

Prophecy as a Counter-Hegemonic Project

Nuer sense of political entitlement in South Sudan not only draws on Ngundeng's prophecy but also on what they perceive as the current domination of South Sudan by the Dinka political class. Various scholars have noted the danger of tribalism in South Sudan, more so in the post-independence period when it has actively subverted the building of a nation on a more inclusive basis:

The perception of Dinka domination pervading the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Sudan People Liberation Army (SPLA) by other ethnic groups is not new. But it has become increasingly marked in a country with a fragile economy, limited opportunities for employment and deep-rooted patrimonialism throughout all tiers of government. While there is a long-standing rivalry for power between the Dinka and Nuer, South Sudan's two largest tribal groups, others, such as the Equatorians, perceive both groups as monopolizing power.¹³

In an article entitled, "Riek Machar on the right side of history" a Nuer further depicts this perception of South Sudan being dominated by the Denka:

It is inevitably right and suitable to attribute the independence of South Sudan to Machar and necessarily ascribing democracy to him [...]. Based upon his unquestionable nationalism and patriotism in objectively choosing what works best for the citizens of this blossoming Democracy, Machar qualifies himself not only the father of this country but also the leadership best exemplary for the country Africa and indeed fits himself for the rest of the world at best [...] Did Machar win the history of the liberation struggle over Garang? I answer, yes, he won it [...] simply because Machar thought it right that to fight for self-determination consequential to the Independence- the total beneficial freedom to the people of southern Sudan, would rather work best for the common good or will of southern Sudanese. This Machar's better off thesis was opposed to Garang's below worse off thesis became the best choice during the referendum on Machar's self-determination. Garang thought it was right that to fight for unity of Sudan under new basis would rather be workable for the greater good of all marginalized Sudanese. This was or is a good idea however, unworkable. [Similarly] Machar has got a doable political ideology opposed to Kiir's. Machar's political ideology is none other than Democracy. Machar's system of governance as he already fine-tuned it, is federalism [...]. Well, Kiir's political ideology is all about *dinkocracy* or *Kiicrocacy* and this typical government is a government of

¹² <http://martingarang.blogspot.com/2014/02/my-god-and-my-militant-rights-games.html>.

¹³ [Hannah Bryce. The Dangers of Tribalism in South Sudan https://www.chathamhouse.org/media/comment/view/196439](https://www.chathamhouse.org/media/comment/view/196439), 19 December 2013.

Dinka by the Dinka for the Dinka. Such *dinkocracy* is for Dinka elders, a real substitution of democracy and its definition.¹⁴

In an article entitled, “In South Sudan, Ngundengism is almost the equivalent of Marxism in the West” a Nuer commentator in a popular South Sudanese blog revealed the enduring legacy of the Ngundeng prophecy as follows:

You may have heard ideologies such as Nyayoism in Kenya, Fidelismo in Cuba, Garveyism in Jamaica and Moaism in China. Ngundengism is an indigenous political thought. If you listen keenly and look at the prevailing circumstances and the ongoing events in South Sudan since we attained independence five years ago, one must come to an agreement that ‘Ngundengism ideology’ has evolved from simple African religious faith to a complex political ideology whose cardinal objectives include *inter alia*; to restore or to change the present regime by all means available at their disposal [...] Ngundengism is almost the equivalent of Marxism. The conflicts in South Sudan including the 2013 one had already been prophesized by Ngundeng, and the victory is believed to be certain. According to the believers of the Ngundeng prophecy, in a rule based on his prophecy all citizens will get all their needs at their doorsteps and the country will be restored to a peaceful path, that there would be no need for elections or new leadership because everyone will be part and parcel of the national cake and South Sudan shall be a country for all; no one can attempt or imagine to go to forest [rebel] with an aim of overthrowing the government based on Ngundeng policies; that will be suicidal act and an affront to the Prophet. As such, there should be a necessary dictatorship.¹⁵

While countering the Nuer accusation of ‘Dinka domination’ the Dinka accuse the Nuer political class for aspiring to be, “the chosen nation” destined to rule South Sudan. For that they use the term “Ngundengism”, as the following excerpts from Dinka commentators indicate. An article entitled: “Ngundeng Bong traditional prophecy is responsible for the mess in South Sudan” reads:

Misperception, wrong ideas, illiteracy and misleading prophecies have harmed South Sudan to fall into this situation in which cannibalism is the order of the day and you cannot share ideas or trust your fellow countrymen or women to do anything in return for togetherness for nation building. To start with, the illusive prophecy has harmed our unity and the prosperity of our country from measures of consolidation repeatedly highlighted about the man who had been highly rated in the crime records of South Sudan, “*Ngundeng Bong*”, over centuries. The courtesy of the men who are claiming Ngundeng prophecies to drag people of South Sudan into senseless war over the years, is a doom illusion that will never disappear in the history of worshippers of prophets of doom. Why the *Ngundeng Bong* prophecy is all about country’s leadership of a left-handed Nuer son and wars if he was truly sent by God to inform his people about foreseen events likely to occur in future South Sudan? The insistence of Machar claims on Ngundeng prophecy to be himself predicted, is a mere tool to gain the support of the entire Nuer community to boost his bloody ambition (presidency) which now

¹⁴ Gatkuoth Lok. <https://paanluelwel.com/2015/04/16/dr-machar-at-the-right-side-of-south-sudan-history-and-his-opponents-at-the-reverse/>.

¹⁵ Dak Buoth. “In South Sudan, Ngundengism is almost the equivalent of Marxism in the West”, Posted: July 23, 2016 by PaanLuelWël in Columnists.

seem impossible after the July 2016 fighting in the presidential palace.¹⁶

In an article entitled “Dr. Riek Machar and the Politics of Ngundengism in South Sudan” posted a month before the outbreak of the December 2013 civil war a critic of Machar shares a similar hostility to “Ngundengism” as one of the drivers of violence in South Sudan:

We need to be honest to history if we want to shape the future. Riek Machar started his leadership as a Nuer leader in South Sudan, and he is believing in that. The grassroots support that he talks about is based on Ngundengism, a belief promoted by Riek that his leadership was predicted by Ngundeng. Before South Sudan independence, the Nuer in the villages were made to believe that Salva Kiir would be slapped to death in Khartoum and Riek Machar would take over as the president. When that happened, Dinka would be slaves forever. When Salva Kiir did not die before 2011, Riek Machar came up with new propaganda that Salva Kiir would die like John Garang and his deputy (Riek Machar) would take over. Riek Machar is not the vice-president right now, and the new propaganda among the Nuer is that he would defeat Salva Kiir in the SPLM Convention and the Dinka would prevent him to lead the SPLM party creating a war between the Nuer and Dinka. Riek Machar’s supporters believe that in 2015 election, a war would take place between the Nuer and Dinka if Riek Machar does not become the President. They said that “prophet Ngundeng predicted that war”. They believe that after the war, the Nuer will win, and Riek Machar would be crowned as a leader for life. When you see Riek Machar talking about democracy within the SPLM, he is talking about it in the context of Ngundengism. He believes that once he fails to achieve the chairmanship of the SPLM party, then, his supporters will start a war. That is what Riek Machar believes in.¹⁷

The debate over the role of prophecy in the South Sudanese civil war is still raging in social media criticising Machar’s bid for power with an Ngundeng ticket:

Riek Machar needs to abandon the concept of using tribal war to achieve his political objective. If he wants to become a president, he will get it through peaceful means, NOT the use of Nuer supremacists to bring him to power by annihilating Dinka. The people of South Sudan need to know whether Riek Machar is a Nuer prophet or a South Sudan politician. He is now the custodian of Ngundeng’s *dang* and he refused *dang* to be handed over to the family of Ngundeng. That shows that Riek still believes in the concept of war against Dinka to come to power as he believed in 1991 that the killing of Bor Denka was prophesied by Ngundeng. If Riek is a South Sudan politician, let him forget Ngundeng’s *dang*. But if he chooses to be a Nuer prophet, then, let him move to Bieh of Ngundeng to start practicing as a Nuer prophet.¹⁸

¹⁶ Thon Atem Ayiei. “Ngundeng traditional prophecy entirely responsible for political mess in South Sudan with Dr. Riek Machar insistence on this ideology”.

¹⁷ Gordon Buay Malek. Dr. Riek Machar and the Politics of Ngundengism in South Sudan. Posted: January 3, 2015 by PaanLuelWël. <https://paanluelwel.com/tag/gordon-buay-malek/>.

¹⁸ <https://paanluelwel.com/.../dr-riek-machar-and-the-politics-of-ngundengism-in-south-sudan>.

Outlook

South Sudan is one of the most conflict-ridden parts of the world. This conflict has colonial roots; a reflection of the crisis of nation building in post-colonial Sudan, and power struggle among the political class of South Sudan; however they would like to represent it in ethnic terms. It is also a major contention of this paper that prophecy in general and the invocation of the Ngundeng prophecy in particular has been implicated in the South Sudanese civil wars constituting its ideational structure. Prophecy among the Nuer of South Sudan is a living tradition. In recent conflicts prophets have played a part both in mobilisation for war and in making peace. Historically, the most celebrated of the Nuer prophets was Ngundeng Bong, whose pronouncements—preserved in songs widely known in South Sudan—are thought by many to have foretold current events in the country. Ngundeng’s songs will continue to inspire interpretation. The songs are often in obscure language, making references to now forgotten contemporary events that can be reinterpreted to apply to current events. These comparisons are inevitable if South Sudan’s present continues to resemble the disturbed and violent times in which Ngundeng lived.

Inadvertently connected to the fulfilment of one of Ngundeng’s prophecies – the return of the *dang* – the historian Douglas Johnson has become an ardent critic of Machar’s prophetic power claim and the implication of this for a peaceful South Sudan when he wrote: “Let us not even try to identify the figure in Ngundeng’s prophecy that peace would be brought by a left-handed man. Ngundeng was left-handed. So is Abel Alier, the leader of the government delegation that negotiated the Addis Ababa Agreement. Some people hope it might mean Riek Machar. But US president George Bush and Barak Obama are also left-handed. So, take your pick, there are enough left-handed men and women to go around.”¹⁹ Such a normative stance threatens to undermine an analytical rigour or misses the social construction of reality.

Without endorsing Machar’s prophetic claim, it is imperative to understand the claim structure and how it is made plausible in the eyes of the believers, including Machar’s pragmatic mix of being a trained political strategist and a politician who makes use of a spiritual repertoire such as the enduring legacy of the Ngundeng prophecy which features as a political capital – as long as it is deployed to ease mobilisation. If the democratic deficit of the SPLA leadership continues to plague South Sudan alternative bases of political legitimacy including prophecies will continue to thrive not only in the form of its instrumentalisation and religious outbidding by political leaders but also as a form of sense-making, human security device and a solace for ordinary Nuer men and women as they found themselves in a situation of life threatening insecurity.

The paper also argued that the political salience of the Ngundeng prophecy relates to the crisis of the South Sudanese national identity. Many Nuer and other non-Denka South Sudanese perceive South Sudan as a polity dominated by the Denka political class, which is also referred to by its critic as “*Dinkacracy*”. Many Denka reject this claim and rather point to “*Ngundegism*” as a Nuer political project of domination of the South Sudanese state. In that sense *Dinkacracy* and *Ngundengism* are mutually constituted, instancing a hegemonic and counter-hegemonic project respectively. The latter also harbours a hegemonic aspiration as long as the centre of the counter power claim is

¹⁹ Douglas Johnson. 2012. “What did Ngundeng really do?” www.upper Nile Times.net, March 22, 2012.

based on an ethnic divine mandate to rule, a sentiment which is generated and reinforced by Machar's prophetic power claim. South Sudan rather needs inclusive ideologies as it struggles to avert its lethal civil wars. In so doing it is hoped that its political leaders also remember the more constructive side of the Ngundeng prophecy, such as nation building that eschews tribal parochialism.

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Yäsäw ጎጅ. Aggressive magic in Addis Ababa; Micro-conflicts in a changing society

Marta Camilla Wright¹

Abstract

Addis Ababa has been going through great changes during the last fifteen years, both structurally and socially. For some this creates an environment of opportunities, but for most people more social, economic and spiritual insecurity. In this time informants at centres of holy water healing in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church talk about an increase in aggressive magic, or in Amharic: *yäsäw ጎጅ*. That magic and witchcraft is rife during times of change has been discussed in research in other African cultures. In Addis Ababa, where this study has been carried out, the situation of aggressive magic is different. The Christian context influences the choices people make, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church offers a solution to the misery and suffering of the afflicted which is: holy water healing.

KEY WORDS: Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Magic, Medical Pluralism, Development, Spirit Possession, Holy Water Healing

Introduction

No one reacts to the loud screaming. It seems there is nothing unusual about it. The people, most of them dressed in white, just stand there, waiting. Many shoes have been left near the gate of the compound. The cement path feels cold under my feet as I enter through the gate and try to make my way towards the prayer house. People move around, coming, going. The screaming and shouting come from the prayer house and from inside the showers. Women, and some men, queue up to shower or baptise² in the freezing cold holy water early in the morning.³ Between seventy and one hundred people

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² The verb *tät'ämmäqä* has many meanings, among them to be squeezed, to be brewed and meanings related to immersing something or someone into water, including to take holy water and to be baptised (Kane 1990). In this context I use baptise to reflect the religious meaning of the word used for a healing purpose in a spiritual context.

³ There is no existing statistics of holy water places within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Addis Ababa, but as there are 150 churches it is safe to say that there are approximately one hundred holy

sit and stand in the compound, drinking holy water, some finish, leave the yoghurt container, can or plastic cup they used to drink from in the basket near the distribution place and leave. New people keep coming. The *šäbältänyoč*⁴ (those who participate in the healing practices) are advised to go outside the compound if they need to vomit or use the toilet, says an information poster near the entrance. Jerry cans and plastic bottles are lined up to be filled with the healing water that the faithful take for use at home. A priest sits near the prayer house blessing people with his wooden hand held cross. One man, around 45 years old from Addis Ababa, seeks healing in this particular healing site. He is willing to tell me his story. He got sick because of *yäsäv ʾəǧ* (aggressive magic), caused by his stepmother.

I grew up in a neighbourhood in Addis Ababa. I went to school there until grade twelve. I used to be a good student, but then I became tired and lazy. That was because of *mädhanit* [literally medicine, in this case meaning harmful medicine] from the family. I changed my job and started a shoe renewal business. After a while I got a very disturbing movement in my stomach and could not work. I went to the hospital and they said I had several amoebas and so on. But they did not find my specific disease.

I started going to holy water, and kept going for three years. I baptised, drank, baptised, drank and so on, on a regular basis. Blood came out with my diarrhoea. That was a symptom of healing. What was in my stomach shrunk and was dying. I think it was big initially. It became smaller because of the holy water. Then at last it came out. It was a snakelike thing. It had arms and legs and was around 15 cm.

This happened approximately six years ago. I became healthy, started work and stopped going to holy water. But there were some eggs inside me still. I should not have started work so quickly. The eggs grew. 2-3 years afterwards the same thing came, and I returned to holy water healing. The first time when I vomited it was green. That was the shell of the animal. Then my vomit was yellow, and then it was like foam. The previous time it was also like that. I stopped my work completely this time. My wife left with my child. I could not make any money. They had renewed it [the harmful medicine]. The people do it to gain success themselves. While baptising the spirit in me told about the magic and who had done it. It was my stepmother. She paid the *tänq^{ay}* 1200 or 2000 birr⁵. I am now far from my family. But even if it is hard, I am really lucky, because now I am closer to God.⁶

Yäsäv ʾəǧ literally means “people’s hand”. It denotes a practice with the aim to harm another person, usually conducted by a “wise person” who knows the secret of pulling demons to harm someone. This practice may also be called *ʾəǧäsäb*⁷, *mätät*⁸, *mädhanit*⁹, *ʾasmat*¹⁰ and *dəǧəmt*¹¹. The fact that the practice has many names is an indication of its

water places as most churches have one. Among the 25 where I have conducted research at least seven are less than seven years old.

⁴ The transliteration system of Encyclopedia Aethiopica is used throughout the article when transliterating Amharic words (Uhlig 2003, xx-xxi).

⁵ Approximately 50 or 90 USD.

⁶ Interview made 22.4.2016 in Addis Ababa.

⁷ Gə‘əz, meaning people’s hand.

⁸ *Mätät* is explained by informants as the process of harming others by spiritual means.

⁹ Literally means medicine, in this context harmful medicine. *Mädhanit* also means health and redemption/salvation.

¹⁰ Literally means “names”, but may be referred to as magic.

¹¹ Of the verb *dəǧämä*, which means recite, in this case to throw magic spells on someone.

importance. Among my informants, all members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), it is frequently reported as one of the important reasons why people get sick or are involved in accidents. Often this explains the situation when people's lives fall apart, be it economically, socially or health-related, or a combination of these. Several informants have explained that they had to move away from their home place because of the risk of a renewal of the magic. Informants talk about killings related to this practice, or that the ultimate aim of the magic is death. Many informants claim that this problem is increasing and they explain it within a framework of rapid change, modernisation and globalisation. The other, even more common explanation is that we, according to EOC, are living in the eighth and last millennium and the end of time, a time in which people are losing faith in God. These two explanations are often interconnected by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians.

This article argues that *yäsäw ʾəǧ*, described as becoming a more common problem in Addis Ababa, has to do with social and psychological circumstances that are changing at a high pace in the Ethiopian capital; the population growth, secularisation, structural and social changes that are taking place, combined with the psychological effects these have on the population.¹² These explanations of disease and misfortune are closely connected with spiritual ideas and religious beliefs in a Christian context of the EOC. Finally this article argues that *yäsäw ʾəǧ* is similar to what is defined as witchcraft, magic or sorcery¹³ in other African cultures be they contemporary or historical. But in the Christian context in Addis Ababa the misery and suffering, which is the result of *yäsäw ʾəǧ*, is often transformed to a sense of existential meaning of getting closer to God and as part of fulfilling religious higher ends related spiritually to the eighth millennium and end of time.

Rapid Changes in Addis Ababa¹⁴

Like many other African cities, Addis Ababa has a high population growth. The government puts a lot of effort into constructing suburbs outside of the city centre and developing the city centre into a business centre in the name of modernisation. The way of living is quickly being changed by this policy, and currently whole living areas are being destroyed in order to construct modern buildings. Ethiopia has for more than a decade been Africa's fastest growing economy. Between 2003 and 2014 Ethiopia's economic growth was in average 10.3 percent per year, and more than twice the average in its region, according to the World Bank (Moller 2015, 22). Much of this growth is because of construction activity. In addition to buildings, roads are being constructed *en masse*. People are forced to move from their neighbourhoods to new areas far from the centre, and many who lost their home without compensation become homeless. An example of forced displacement is that caused by the construction of a light rail which has huge consequences for people's lives (Yidnekachew 2015). People express that the changes, be they positive or negative, make them experience life as unpredictable and insecure.

¹² This article is based on one year of field research conducted in 2015-16. The research is part of the PhD project within the Study of Religion on disease and healing practices in the EOTC, which I am carrying out as part of my work as PhD candidate at the Department for Archeology, History, the Study of Culture and the Study of Religion at University of Bergen, Norway.

¹³ These terms vary in the work of different scholars, see below.

¹⁴ The urban environment of Addis Ababa is to a certain degree constantly undergoing changes.

The way of life in compounds with several families, in fellowships, sharing and working together, is rapidly becoming less and less common, and a new living style in apartment buildings and individual compounds with tall fences is becoming the way of life; a more individualised and also a much more expensive life. The time for family and for maintaining relationships and neighbourhood is shrinking. Part of the population (middle class and above) have more opportunities and choices in today's Addis Ababa, and for most people life has become more complex. Informants talk about stress. Being stressed or disturbed is one of the diseases that have been frequently mentioned. All these societal changes influence relationships, which become looser and less interdependent, and at the same time people live close together in a city with higher and higher population density. When talking to Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in Addis Ababa about disease and healing, the issue of the end of time was often mentioned, and informants gave examples of which recent developments show that the end of time is near. This time is by many characterised by decreased faith and increased sin. Certain diseases are categorised as modern, like cancer, back problems, and diabetes. Moreover people claim that one gets more easily sick during this time. Some mention “big” developments like globalisation and modernisation, with which they assume increased competition to follow, when explaining what they claim is increased numbers of people suffering from aggressive magic and more people shouting at the holy water healing places.¹⁵ Some say that there are more people shouting, which means more are possessed by spirits, now. The spirits talk about how the person they possess was hurt by someone, and most often these are stories of how family, friends or colleagues harmed the individual through a process of *yäsāw ʾəǧ*. In a society where sick people depend on their family and social network to look after them, this represents severe challenges. Recently the church instructed priests serving at holy water healing centres not to ask spirits name names when telling how the spirit got to possess the afflicted person. Apparently this decision was made in order to reduce conflict between people. The urban setting of Addis Ababa has dramatically changed in the last years, and even if this is not historically unique, people associate it with a particular phase in history; the end of time or the “eighth millennium”.

***Yäsāw ʾəǧ*: A Disease**

The medical system in Ethiopia can be described as pluralistic, mixing biomedical medicine and traditional medical beliefs interlinked with spiritual and religious beliefs and practices¹⁶ (Wondwosen 2006, Otto 2002, Schirripa 2010, Levene, Phillips, and Alemu 2016). Ethiopian Orthodox Christians have a more holistic perspective to disease and the healing of it. Physical/natural, spiritual and existential aspects of disease, symptoms and reasons for them are interconnected while understanding disease and healing. This is opposed to Western views that tend to compartmentalise life more, and normally see spiritual and religious dimensions as irrelevant. The fact that Ethiopians do utilise alternative healing methods to a considerable degree is confirmed by many (Anderson 2007, Wondwosen 2006, Pankhurst 1990, Hannig 2013, Berhanu 2010, Hermann 2012), also in the considerable amount of medical publications in this field of study (Slikkerveer

¹⁵ The claimed increase of *yäsāw ʾəǧ* is difficult to verify, as aggressive magic has been part of Ethiopian society historically, both in rural and urban environments.

¹⁶ The term biomedicine is chosen instead of “Western” or “modern” medicine, in line with most research in medical anthropology. The term traditional medicine is here chosen to denote what is also denoted ethnomedicine or indigenous medicine, as it is close to the Amharic word used: *babəlawi*, which is normally translated as “traditional”.

1982, Kloos et al. 1987, Berhanu 2010, Fekadu et al. 2015). Biomedicine fails to answer the existential questions that come with disease, such as “Why me?”, and the culturally recognised responses to disease is the motivation for people to choose the traditional treatments rather than biomedical treatment (Wondwosen 2006). This, it seems, and not so much the fact that health services are poor and sometimes not as accessible, is the common reason why people continue to use traditional medicine, like holy water healing. Addis Ababa has the best developed health services in the country, but the parallel structure of the healing places of the EOC is growing and several new healing places have been emerging in the last seven or eight years. Biomedicine is also considered unable to heal disease believed to be caused by spirit possession, and informants explain that the spirits trick the doctors, hiding in different body parts creating different kinds of symptoms of diseases.

The Ethiopian *yäsäw ʾəǧ* is often translated to “bad medicine” in English. The aetiology of *yäsäw ʾəǧ* or what the anthropologist and psychiatrist Alan Young, who did extensive research in Gonder, calls, “people are poisoned by their enemies” is in some form described in the literature but not necessarily called *yäsäw ʾəǧ* (Young 1975:7, Wondwosen 2006). It is a spiritual practice used to influence others, often to harm others, and *qənat* (envy or jealousy) is generally mentioned as the main motivation for doing this. The practice can be used to exert influence in a positive way, for instance as was explained by one priest who had the wisdom of doing *mäsäjäfäkä*¹⁷, which he said he used to help couples to avoid divorce. Also the phenomenon of *buda* (evil eye) has a similar kind of negative connotation, but evil eye is often claimed to be a capability of a person normally belonging to a specific group of people who have evil eye (Reminick 1974, Freeman and Pankhurst 2003, Salamon 1999). *Yäsäw ʾəǧ* is normally categorised as a disease, but is however not curable in the biomedical health system.

Categorisation of disease in many areas of Ethiopia is of a fluid character and it is not easy to make clear cut distinctions (Slikkerveer 1982, Schirripa 2010, Wondwosen 2006, Otto 2002). My research in Addis Ababa confirms this view. However, it may be useful in order to get some grip of how Ethiopian Orthodox believers often understand disease to suggest a categorisation. In general it is possible to argue that Ethiopian Orthodox Christians split into three types of disease: Corporeal disease, mental disease and spiritual disease, but these categories are not mutually exclusive entities and, importantly, people’s understanding of disease is to a large extent interconnected with how they perceive the causes of diseases.

The Ethiopian Orthodox users of holy water in Addis Ababa that I have interviewed generally explain that there are four causes for disease, often combined. One is the “natural” or biological, the other is the aggressive magic or *yäsäw ʾəǧ*, the third is God’s desire to test a person and the fourth is God’s punishment. In general all diseases may be caused by evil spirits (*säytan, aganänt, ʾarkus mänfäs*) and all could also be a spirit possession.

Informants are not always clear in their use of the terminology of *yäsäw ʾəǧ*, *dəgəmt*, *mätät*, *ʾəǧäsäb* or *mädhanit*,¹⁸ and the terms may be used interchangeably, but the common point is that these are instigated by others to harm a third person. This is how a theologian in the EOC, Shitila Moges, explains it in his book when discussing the

¹⁷ Love magic, which is to make someone love someone else.

¹⁸ See above for explanations of these terms.

different kinds of evil spirits that harm people (Moges 2006).¹⁹ *Dəgəmt* he describes as a possession that is enacted against *people to ruin their peace, health, and love life*. Shitila Moges goes on to explain about the ʾəǧäsäb (or *yäsäv ʾəǧ*) as a kind of *dəgəmt*:

This one is a specially made medicine by the evil worshippers usually given to their targets as a form of food, beverage and also by sprinkling it on people's clothes. Like the other ones, its aim is to make people victims of various diseases. This one also works when put on daily pathways of targeted people and near places where they sleep. According to the Bible people who do this are usually murderers, sex addicts (adulterers), and evil worshippers. Such a type of evil act is demonstrated and witnessed in possessed people from whom various animals are excreted from their body.

Types and characteristics of ʾəǧäsäb disease: When a person is attacked by the ʾəǧäsäb spirit, he/she suffers from severe stomach and intestine pain as a result of creatures put there by the evil spirit. Among the reported things which the creatures do to victims are: making the victim lose his/her appetite, biting their stomach and intestines, growling loudly, running in the stomach and hiding itself while the victims undertake a modern check-up (Moges 2006, 22).

This explanation shows how biological symptoms of disease are mixed with spiritual causes and thus need to be cured by spiritual means. Normally, people who are subject to *yäsäv ʾəǧ* will show signs of spirit possession and will often shout while being baptised. But also there are spirits who do not shout and those are perceived as more difficult to get rid of. Even if people are possessed they may not be aware of it. It is not until they come to the holy water site they understand that they are possessed. In order to initiate a process of harming someone a person who is trained in these secrets has to be consulted. The practitioners of *yäsäv ʾəǧ* are in general perceived to be either the *ṭänqʷay* or the *däbtära*.

Ṭänqʷay

Ṭänqʷay is the traditional healer and “wise-man” who can also perform harmful magic like *yäsäv ʾəǧ*. *Ṭänqʷay* by several is described as being a general term denoting both *baläzar* (the one who is the master of a certain kind of spirits called zar) and *däbtära* (Bishaw 1991, Wondwosen 2006, Aspen 2001, Young 1970) According to Wondwosen the word *ṭänqʷay* is the general term for one category of spiritual healers (Wondwosen 2006) My material is rather more in line with Aspen's discussion on these terms (Aspen 2001:115ff). He describes how people denote the professionals working in this field according to which group they themselves belong to. For instance someone who is an active participant in the church will distinguish clearly between the *däbtära* and the *ṭänqʷay*²⁰. This is similarly how informants in Addis Ababa describe them. *Ṭänqʷay* is frequently mentioned by informants as a form of sorcerer who is different from *däbtära*, as the latter has his education in the church. The *ṭänqʷay* uses traditional medicine and other methods to help customers to harm others, among other services. The literature on medicine and healing in Ethiopia does not discuss in deep and does not agree on the role of the *ṭänqʷay*. This is in fact also the case among informants.

¹⁹ This book is in Amharic and not translated to English, used here in an unofficial translation.

²⁰ The debated role of priests and others who perform magic goes back to the time of the reign of Emperor Zara Yaqob (reign: 1434-1468). See for instance (Tamrat 1973, 235-260)

Däbtära

Däbtära is an unordained priest and formally the musician during church services in the EOC. He has generally many years of traditional church education (Otto 2002, Shelemay 1992, Young 1975). The *däbtära* has a multifaceted role as he is both formally part of the church serving as cantor, presenter of psalms and hymns of the mass and scribes and repositories for much of the church's learning, and at the same time he is a magician and healer (Shelemay 1992, Young 1975). According to Young, the lay notion of the *däbtära* is as a spoiled priest who is, among other things, a commander of demons (Young 1975:6).²¹ This is also how informants describe them, and many see them as dangerous. The reason for this is that they have insights in the spiritual sphere and church knowledge which the *Ṭänqʷay* does not have, and it has been explained thus: “they use your Christian name and holy books”.²² According to a *däbtära* informant they are trained in astrology and numerology and they have knowledge about herbs. He, and many others, started their career in the church as children, and their teachers infused herbs of different sorts into their skin in order to make studying easier for them, so that they would be able to memorise easily and study long hours.

People fear the *däbtära*, but also deacons are sometimes accused of having performed *yäsäw ʾəǧ*. The practice is not accepted by the EOC, but most priests and laity will acknowledge the existence of witchcraft and magical practices. Most representatives of the EOC as well as laity will say that those with church education that practise harmful magic are outside the church.

The Process of *yäsäw ʾəǧ*: Two Examples

As mentioned above envy or jealousy is often mentioned as the main reason for harming others. ‘Mesfin’ is a student in his twenties with a scholarship that he got as one of thirty lucky ones.²³ He started studying at a university, but after some time his notebook was stolen, and he thinks it was taken to the *däbtära* or *ṭänqʷay* who then put magic on it. After that, while as yet unaware of the aggressive act against him, he started to be very tired, and it became difficult for him to study. Finally, during his midterm exam, he saw only blank pages. His supervisor at his university advised him to go to a certain holy water healing centre in Addis Ababa. When I met him he had been there two months, and was soon ready to go back to his studies, but he was afraid that his co-students would renew the attack upon him. At holy water healing centres there are many similar cases. *Yäsäw ʾəǧ* is also used in the context of business in order to gain success.²⁴

Another informant, a man in his thirties, got his disease/spirit from food that was given to him by his colleagues.²⁵ There was a period of insecurity and competition at work, because the ministry that he worked in was going to fuse with another ministry. People were looking to get better jobs and even competing to keep their jobs. My informant explained that he was an appreciated worker and was promised a good

²¹ Alan Young's research is conducted in Gonder, but because of the scarcity of sources this is one of the important works on the topic.

²² Ethiopian Orthodox have a Christian name given to them during baptism and a “secular” name used in day-to-day life.

²³ Based on interviews conducted in Addis Ababa 19.3.2016, 23.3.2016, 25.3.2016.

²⁴ For an example of this from a Jewish context see (Levene and Bhayro 2005).

²⁵ Based on an interview conducted in Addis Ababa 24.3.2016.

position. This was why his colleagues, whom he discovered later, were former priests with contacts and knowledge, went to a *däbtära* to harm him. He fell sick and was unable to continue working. “I don’t eat or drink with people anymore. Only in the *mabbär* (association, in his case a religious one) and the *ʾəddär* (formal neighbour fellowship) I feel safe”, he explained. In Ethiopian society sharing meals is socially important, and non-participation may have serious social consequences.

Micro-Conflicts with Big Consequences

Renewal - Social Exclusion

As we have seen above there are several accounts of people who had to leave their home place because of the harm done by others. Some people stay away from family and home community for many years. Many start living in a holy water healing centre or near one. There is a perception that the evil spirits directed towards someone may turn and hurt the initiator of the harmful act if the initiator does not redo the *yäsäw ʾəǧ*. Even if you are better or cured of the symptoms, they may reappear. This is more likely if the one who was attacked practices his or her religion strictly. One male informant explained it like this:

At the same time if people, who do such bad things to others, do not return to God through confession, the *dəgəmt* they prepared for others will hurt them. Especially they will make the renewal if they feel like the person they want to hurt again is walking on the path of God. In addition, there is another thing related to the *dəgəmt*. If a person who was affected by it gets healed very fast they believe that it will hurt the person who tried to hurt that innocent individual by masterminding this *dəgəmt* and bad work.²⁶

Lifelong Healing Process

For the individual who has become a victim of *yäsäw ʾəǧ*, there is usually no easy way out, but if there is a way out, it is by devoting oneself to the “true faith” by practising what is understood as right. The informants who have told me in depth about their story of disease and misery have spent at least one year sorting things out. For several of them it is a life time process. Intense treatment with holy water combined with prayer, fasting, prostrations and other kinds of healing material like incense, ashes, and holy oil, is what most informants, both lay and clergy, describe as the way to good health. Many informants say that the spirits cannot resist when the possessed practice intensively. In the end the spirit will shout “It burns me, I cannot take it anymore”.

The treatment does not stop once the healing is assumed complete. Several informants say that they have to be dedicated and go to a holy water healing centre on a regular basis in order to stay well, and once they stop the religious practices they get worse. People say that they are healed, but that they are trying to be even better by continuing the treatment; or they feel that they need to continue out of fear of falling ill again. Paradoxically there are also many accounts of people getting ill once they start practising their religion more seriously. This paradox reflects the perception that Ethiopian Orthodox believers have of living in a constant struggle between good and

²⁶ Interview conducted 31.5.2016 in Addis Ababa.

evil. This conflict escalates in what they perceive to be a rapidly changing world in the eighth, and last, millennium.

Making Sense of “Modernity”: The End of Time

According to the EOC we are currently in the year 7508.²⁷ This is first and foremost based on the description of the apocalypse in the Revelations of John, but there are additional books used by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians that are not part of the Bible that further describe this last millennium²⁸. Informants mention the symptoms of the end of time as the increase of war, fighting between individuals, lack of love, broken marriages, envy, violence, sexual abuse, natural disasters and the like, and in general these are signs that the fight between good and evil is intensified. The practices of harming and healing take place within the EOC and are consequently influenced by the Ethiopian Orthodox worldview. Christian beliefs and practices are at the same time intertwined with biomedicine and what may be called traditional beliefs and practices more independent of Christianity. Within this framework people explain the fact that they become sick and they search for healing at holy water healing places in the EOC. The *yäsäw ʾəǧ* is also a symptom of this fight between good and evil. There are several things that you can do and must do in order to stay closer to God, so that you may not be harmed by others. The negative effect of the *yäsäw ʾəǧ* usually comes as a disease. It prevents you from doing what you would normally do, and hinders development and success. There is a perception that as Ethiopian Orthodox believers they are caught in the middle of a fight between good and evil, and people experience this in their everyday life. This fight is intensified as we are at the end of time. Even though witchcraft and magic, practices similar to *yäsäw ʾəǧ*, have been rife throughout history in most cultures, the claimed increase of the practices is in Addis Ababa explained framed in ideas concerning the end of time and the so called eighth millennium.

Witchcraft, Sorcery and Magic

The religious practices described above are similar to witchcraft and magical beliefs and practices we find in other cultures. In African countries these have had and have a great impact on people’s lives, and witchcraft, sorcery and magic are practices that have been debated for decades, most significantly starting from Evans-Pritchard’s work among the Azande in Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1937). He makes the distinction between witch/witchcraft with inherent supra-normal powers and sorcerers who use techniques or “medicines” to harm others (Evans-Pritchard 1937). The distinction between witchcraft and sorcery is only sometimes applicable, and these phenomena have to be studied according to their local context (Moore and Sanders 2001). Witchcraft and magic in African religions and belief systems contain the notion that people are able to bring misfortune, disease and death upon others by the help of sorcerers, and try to interfere with other people’s success (Haram and Yamba 2009). Envy or jealousy is an important driving force in this and this has to do with the concept of limited good, which has as its consequence that if someone is rich, someone else is not (Bowie 2006). These forces are

²⁷ The age of the earth is 5500 years before Christ and according to the Ethiopian calendar it is in 2016 the year 2008, which makes 7508 years.

²⁸ There are several books describing the end of time, among them are *Mänəgädə’e Sämayə*, and *Fäkarä Yäsusə*. These books are published locally in Amharic.

ambiguous and can also be used in the opposite way, to ensure success, protect and reinforce authority (Geschiere 1997).

Research on witchcraft in other African countries show that witchcraft practices are symptoms of developments in society, and increase during times of change, increased competition and social insecurity and as a reaction to modernity (Geschiere 1997, Moore and Sanders 2001, Haram and Yamba 2009, Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). Others argue that witchcraft or sorcery and the magic that is performed more essentially has to do with relationships and social and psychological security (Westerlund 2006). That is to say that these phenomena increase in times of greater anxiety. Comparative perspectives from other African countries, where research shows that there is a shift from religious to human agents of disease and that witchery, as David Westerlund argues, is rapidly increasing hand in hand with modern changes (Westerlund 2006). According to Westerlund among the common reasons for disease in African religions is what he calls human causation of disease (Westerlund 2006). Mary Douglas in her more general theories suggests problems of human causation of misfortune are likely to be marginal among peoples with sparse and irregular social contacts (Douglas 2003). Westerlund argues that in cultures in which the emphasis on ascribed relationships has changed into a social system of achieved relationships are those where human causation increases. Those who hurt you are normally people who know you and they may be people who are very close to you, but the relationship is achieved in some way, rather than ascribed, as for instance are relationships between family members of full blood. In Addis Ababa life styles and relationships are changing. Informants in this study mention both social and psychological reasons to what they claim to be an increased prevalence of *yäsäw ʾəǧ*. It is safe to suggest that this could be considered to contribute to the frequent reports of *yäsäw ʾəǧ* in contemporary Addis Ababa in line with analysis from other contexts, such as witchcraft prevalence in other African countries.

But Ethiopian Orthodox Christians place the developments they find characteristic of modernity within the end of time-concept, and thus find meaning in what is going on. On a societal level they interpret what is going on in the eight millennium discourse, and believe that what is unfolding is simply what is supposed to happen during this time as the world is near the end. On a more personal level people also express thankfulness towards the person who has harmed them because that made them start seeking a true faith and a life closer to God.

Conclusion

People in Addis Ababa express that they go through a period where much of the society they used to know is changing. In this environment informants claim that there are more people harmed by *yäsäw ʾəǧ*, similar to what is found in other African cultures. We do not have the evidence to measure to what degree there are more conflicts or increase of *yäsäw ʾəǧ* now than, for instance, fifteen years ago or earlier. However, informants talk about an increase of aggressive magic and conflicts related to this, and that many people show symptoms of spirit possession at holy water healing centres. This is expressed as part of the discourse that concerns the change that they experience. This article suggests that these micro level conflicts and the idea of an intensified conflict between good and evil reflect the changes on a macro level that have severe consequences for people who suffer from lives falling apart. Still, within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, there is a way of handling the misery and the insecurity of *yäsäw ʾəǧ*. The afflicted can spend time

at holy water healing centres and, rather than suffer from social exclusion, can be part of a healing process within the church. This is one way of dealing with the rapidly changing, insecure and dangerous world and it is made possible with the framework of Christian beliefs of the good-evil dualism and the end of time. In this way people re-establish a safe and meaningful life and world order.

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Conflict and Violence at the Crossroad of Religion and ‘New’ Media: Periscoping Faith-based Crisis through the Eyes of Camera in the Sharia-age of Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

Recent engagement in local cinema production by northern Nigerian Muslims (Kannywood) elicited numerous religious disapprovals from Islamists and a section of ‘*ulamā*’² leading to contestations, and even persecutions, especially after the Sharia reintroduction in the year 2000. This article discusses the role of religious and media actors in a structural violence context. It elucidates on how the stance of Islamists on Kannywood, which is pervasive among youths, reproduces factors and actors in the region’s history of intolerance, physical conflicts and ‘structural’ violence. This new media forms of religious conflict and violence accentuates the role played by the intersection of religion and ‘new’ media in conflicts and violence. It analyses how youth engagement in the movie industry and the interference of Islamists provoke new and reignite old modes of religious tensions. The data used was collected during a 12-month period of ethnographic research in northern Nigeria between 2014 and 2016 which was part of a Doctoral programme.

KEY WORDS: Religion, Movies, Sharia, Censorship, Conflict, Violence

Introduction

Contemporary scholars of religion (e.g. Geertz 1993; Twiss & Conser 1992; Tayob 1999; and Shields 2008) have begun to move beyond focusing on the idea of religion as an object of study investigating a factual variety of religious phenomena in the world. This

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² Islamist in this paper refers to people struggling for full implementation of Sharia in northern Nigeria. They include mainstream Muslim scholars (*‘ulamā*) and activists. I use the two words interchangeably.

trend prompts new points of departure in understanding the role of religion in societies, particularly regarding its relation to other social institutions. My recent observation on the intersection of religion and ‘new’ media among northern Nigerian Muslims reveals new nuances of religion, media, and violence influenced by Islamists through contemporary northern Nigerian Muslim cinema, referred to as Kannywood in this article.

It has been established that media is an intrinsic part of every religion (De Witte 2003; Ibrahim 2013). Thus, at the centre of every religion is a certain kind of mediation between: (i) the physical and the spiritual world; and (ii) the individual person and the religious community (De Witte 2003:174). Richard Fox (2009) argues that it is quite difficult to discuss religion at all—during any historical period, without reference to media. Religious actors require a certain kind medium to experience any kind of religion. Therefore, media are the site of religious experience and meaning making (Martin-Barbero 1997).

Recent scholarship about the ‘media’, especially the ‘new’ technologies that offer communication capabilities to a much larger audience such as radio, television, and the internet, are affecting and redefining modes of operations of all social institutions including the religious (Appadurai 1996; Horsfield 2008). The media have been playing a major role in defining the religious history of northern Nigeria and elsewhere. Different religious actors and groups at different times use it to promote different brands of Islam they subscribe to within the region and beyond. The differences that emerge in communicating beliefs and practices, particularly between the Sufi, the Salafi, and the Shia led to competitions, contestations, and which often sparked violence among their followers (Umar 1994; Larkin 2009).

While northern Nigerian Islamists use new media such as radio, video and recorded cassettes in their ‘religious’ engagements (Larkin 2009), Muslim youths in the region tend to use it differently. Between early 1990s to the present, a local Muslim home video industry (Kannywood) emerged. Within a short period Kannywood became popular in the region and beyond. Sooner than later, Islamists started challenging the filmmakers, who are mostly young entrepreneurs, on cultural and Sharia grounds (Adamu 2003; Mc Cain 2013; Krings 2015). They accused the filmmakers of promoting socio-cultural and political changes which, according to the Islamists’ perspective, contradict Islamic values which they laboured to establish over years in the region. Individual Islamists and groups that criticise Kannywood filmmakers use religion as their main justification. For example, at the onset of Kannywood, several prominent ‘*ulamā*’ in northern Nigeria expressed their disapproval through their various media of communicating with people, such as Friday sermons, daily congregations, religious classes and various homily sessions.

On the other hand, the filmmakers did not only repeatedly deny such accusations but also, claimed to be doing the same work as their accusers. They consider their accusers as those who have not only failed to come to terms with reality in their socio-religious and cultural engagement but, using the monopoly of religious authority to deny and oppress others. In what, I see as an element of a generational gap at the crossroad of this popular video culture and northern Nigerian Islam, filmmakers often point to the failure of the Islamists to appreciate the new ways of communication and how the former impart changes among people.

In this article, I aim to discuss the role of religion (as embodied by the Islamists) not only as an instrument of controlling society and maintaining the *status quo* through resisting changes from ‘others’ (as manifested through local movies) but its role in political, socio-cultural and economic forms of violence. I also explore ways in which the intersection of religious beliefs, practices, and institutions on the one hand and Kannywood movies production on the other hand, have been instrumental in reproducing causes of conflict and violence in northern Nigeria. In other words, I intend to discuss forms of perceived and real violence within the context of mediating and mediating religious ideas, experiences, and other social issues through Kannywood. The purpose is to show how the stance of Islamists on Kannywood physically and structurally exacerbate intolerance of both secular and religious views of others. In this context, I will analyse how youth engagement in the popular culture and the interference of Islamists, through criticisms and sanctions, provokes new and reignites old modes of religious tension in the region and in some instances, results in physical violence. This, however, extends to both inter and intra-religious tensions among the religiously diverse people of northern Nigeria. I used qualitative data — interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation generated during an intensive nine months of ethnographic research in northern Nigeria. I conducted the field research in three phases, between April 2014 and March 2017. In the next section, I present theoretical considerations of understanding religion and violence.

Theoretical Consideration: Religion, Media and Violence

The field of religious violence studies is a vibrant one in Africa and Nigeria. A survey of the literature shows that one of the major causes of these faith-based acts violence and conflict in these countries and elsewhere is largely due to the activities of some religious groups seeking to change society according to their (mis)interpretation of religious texts or based on their own ideologies and/or interests. Nevertheless, the role of those religious actors through media trajectories and the role of the media as instruments in perpetrating religious violence is still under-researched in the region.

Media, as conduit pipes through which the message of those struggles is embedded (McLuhan and Fiore 1967; Hoover 1997a; 1997b; Horsfield 2008) is central to understanding how the actors achieve their aims. For instance, the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the role of print and electronic media had at that time, has had a high global profile on many Muslim communities in Africa in all areas of human endeavours, leading to struggles for a more orthodox interpretation of Islam (Miles 2003; McCormac 2005; Adamu 2007). Taking this as a point of departure, scholarly discussions on the elastic concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘media’ toward socio-political struggles which in many cases adopts ‘violent’ means capture the play between northern Nigerian Islamists and some Muslim youths operating through Kannywood in the northern Nigerian Sharia context. In this literature survey, which also formed my theoretical framework, I look at how the struggle between various actors using religion and media as tools generate ‘physical’ and ‘structural’ violence in the communities they live. In what follows, I briefly discuss each of these trio concepts and then link them to see how they provide us with a framework for understanding religious violence and conflict at the intersection of northern Nigerian Islam and popular video films.

Religion

Until recently, some scholars, particularly in the West, portrayed religion as an ideology that belonged to a past phase of human development. However, recent studies show that religion has continued in the face of the advancement of science and technology to play a great role in the existence of human societies. It has retained its major role in influencing human thinking since the beginning of human civilisation. Moreover, the increasing presence of religion in public life has provoked an ambivalent response from contemporary scholars trying to understand its nature, and what its “efflorescence means for our understanding of the nature of politics and society” (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008). The authors pointed that:

...when religion does appear outside the personal and private, it often gets read as a sign for something else: an idiom through which marginal groups express political demands; a salve in times of crisis; a vehicle of social mobilization and solidarity; an instrument by which cynical leaders manipulate their supporters. A chief fear in this regard is that religious movements and the forms of violence that sometimes accompany them further what are “really” barely disguised political projects lurking under the name of religion (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008:1).

In other words, the interaction between religion and the general society within which it functions made it a potent force for socio-political control and manipulation thereby playing a significant role in the entire societal process, especially in societies whose people are religious in their thinking and actions (Alhaji-Shehu 2012) typical of northern Nigeria.

Media

We should have in our mind that the concept of media is a general and overbearing one. It denotes a great range of items and phenomena. Thus, media denotes things and phenomena that connect ideas, situations, environments, and people. It is anything that has the potential of conveying messages to the senses through viewing, listening and or experiencing. Thus, both *mimbar* (Mosque pulpit), recorded sermons and movies are important media through which Muslim actors communicate, as well as compete for influence and hegemony.

Violence

The term “violence” which is similarly pliant comprises a range of meanings, including “to force or forcible”, “to injure”, “to dishonour”, and “to violate or violently”. The Princeton Cognitive Science Laboratory defines violence as “an act of aggression (as one against another who resists); a turbulent state resulting in injuries and destructions; ferocity: the property of being wild or turbulent”.³ Although violence clearly encompasses injury to persons or property, it also includes “the forcible interference with personal freedom, violent or passionate conduct or language (and) finally passion or fury” (Tanner 2007). A comprehensive definition of violence is found in Galtung (1990) who defines it beyond physical and psychological dimension to cover an “avoidable

³ <https://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/journals/article/index.xml?journalid=32&articleid=60&>. Date accessed May 10, 2016.

insult to basic human needs”. He emphasises the hidden or in his own term, “structural” dimension of violence caused by political or economic structures of exploitation and inequality. However, while violence may be physical or non-physical its immediate target may be either humans or material structures, and its goal is to destroy the existence or degrade the dignity of persons or group of persons. This definition is more comprehensive and relevant to this work.

For violence to occur there must be motive. In this context, religion is often used to motivate violence. The fact that religion is value-based rendered people to be emotionally attached to it and usually less tolerant of any criticism of it (Alhaji-Shehu 2012). In a more general sense, Eller (2015) argues that world religions created dualism of believers and nonbelievers or us-versus-them. This renders violence possible if not, inevitable because always the group(s) that feel themselves in possession “of the one true religion” have little sympathy or tolerance for other groups. In a similar but more tailored manner, Appleby (2011) discusses that “strong religions” through their interpretive approach, possess the capacity to enjoin or legitimate violence, as well as breed movements, groups, networks, and organisations driven primarily by religious goals and dynamics. This assertion is evident in Nigeria with the northern part of the country as the most susceptible, as there is no single state among the nineteen states in the region that has not experienced violence in the name of one religion (Alhaji-Shehu 2012).

Based on the above, we could describe religious conflicts and violence to imply disputes or disagreement based on differences in faiths and interests. These may manifest in a form of physical, cultural, or structural aspects.

Religion, Media, and Violence Converged

Towards understanding religions and their interactions with media technologies in a pluralistic society, media theorists postulate that all social institutions respond to the forces of new media. Scholars on media and religion (e.g. Hoover 1997; 2006; De Vries 2001; Meyer 2006; Horsfield 2008; Morgan 2008; Hjavard 2008; and Hirschkind and Engelke 2011) argue that media have the capacity to change social institutions and modes of interactions in culture and society. It is not only a neutral tool through which actors communicate religious messages but influence the ‘meaning’ conveyed (mediatisation) (Ibrahim 2013). This could be justified through the resurgence of faith-based media and their main roles as propaganda tools among various violent groups like al-Qaida, ISIS, and Boko Haram as well as non-violent Sunni and Shia organisations. Therefore, it is about media setting the agenda. Media actors use media institutions to manipulate society.

In this context, I prefer to emphasise the role of religious and media actors rather than the abstract concepts of religion and media. Actors, through mediation and mediatisation, invoke religious sensibilities of people to create (sacred) experiences and use threat, intimidation, coercion, etc. in justifying their various engagements in the name of beliefs and practices, which the actors conveyed through media. This approach resonates Appleby’s suggestion of approaching religious violence through the actions of people that embodied it. Since both religion and media are in themselves abstracts, they become objects or material of violence only when the actors that personified them decide to invoke or manipulate the sensibilities of their fellows in justifying their interests

by means of violence. This happens both within the same religion and between different religions and unfolds through media infrastructure (Larkin 2008).

Meyer (2009; 2015) uses this framework of the materiality of religion and media to map the nexus between the two. She points to how people share or transmit their religious imaginaries and images *via* various means: verbal language, pictures, arts and other visual means. In other words, religious actors are active agents in mediating and mediatising religious ideas and interests through media. They do so through various religious media forms. In an edited volume, Meyer (2008: xi) points to how religious organisations skilfully use the new availability of media such as movies, television, radio and print to their need thereby raising the questions of, “what happens when religions adopt new media? How does this affect the message, the way in which believers are reached and addressed, and the role of religion in the public realm?” Similarly, in her monograph about the role of Ghanaian video films in mediating spirituality, particularly Christianity and African Traditional Religions, Meyer (2015) establishes the connection between religion, visual culture, and communication. She provides useful insight into how religious actors use video film technologies to recreate and retransmit religious ideas and vision. In so doing, she analyses video films as, “relay points that feed and are fed by what and how people imagined” (Meyer 2015:13).

Taking my inspiration from Meyer, in this article, I analyse Kannywood movies as relay points through which Islamists, in the wake of popular video culture, influence the society by reproducing and transmitting their worldview and ideologies through movies that were hitherto meant to serve a different purpose by their producers.

Faith-based Conflict and Violence through the Eyes of Camera in Northern Nigerian Sharia Context

As I pointed out in the introduction, home video culture started in Nigeria in the 1990s. At its inception in the predominantly Muslim north, Islamists rejected it. One of the major reasons is that the filmmakers promoted contrary worldviews to that of the Islamists. Eventually, the Islamists intolerance culminated in specific censorship, and reached its height with Sharia reimplementation in the year 2000 during which the Kannywood filmmakers felt deprived and “oppressed through religion”. In addition to subduing the role of the Kannywood movies in challenging their hegemony, the Islamists use the phenomenon to reignite the age-old interfaith rivalry between the Sufis and Salafists. The movies also become a medium through which inter and intra-religious intolerance are mediated. I discuss below various nuances of faith-based crises and violence that stem out of the popular video film culture and Sharia reimplementation in northern Nigerian.

1. Threats and Counter Threats Between Kannywood Filmmakers and Religious Establishments

When Kannywood started in the early 1990s in the northern city of Kano, the Islamists labelled it un-Islamic and incongruous to the region’s Islamic culture. The indigenous filmmakers rejected the claim and consequently tensions ensued. One of the basic features of the phenomenon that made the atmosphere ripe for religious violence was the use of threat and counter-threat between the Islamists and the film practitioners. For example, when the filmmakers realised that their interest was at stake, they started

attacking Islamists through some polemical kinds of films. For example, they produced two films *Saliba* and *Mallam Karkata* in which they attacked the credibility of the Islamists by depicting them as less holy as they claimed to be. They presented 'ulamā' and film practitioners at the same level—as both professionals—and showed that there are bad eggs in every profession—even among the 'ulamā'. This led to a group of religious leaders in Kaduna making an edict (*fatwa*) that sentenced the producer of *Saliba* film to death. There was serious panic among the filmmakers, as they believed if those threatening them had their way, they could execute them. Some of them cited an example of Gideon Akaluka, a Christian who denigrated Quranic papers and was killed by some fanatics in accordance with a *fatwa* passed against him.⁴

Similarly, an unknown religious group distributed pamphlets in mosques across Kano state inciting people against Kannywood filmmakers. According to Ado Gidan-Dabino, who is one of the pioneers of Kannywood, the pamphlets described them as anti-Islam and the Sharia formations of the region. It then enjoined people to ostracise filmmakers. The following week, some filmmakers, however, responded by distributing a rejoinder to the same mosques' attendants rebuking the content of the previous pamphlets; this situation led to the arrest of many of the filmmakers by state security operatives.

Gidan-Dabino, who stood up against attempts to stop them from producing films, also recounted that a phantom group called "Islamic Values Protectors" sent him two different letters threatening his life and that of his colleagues. According to him, he reported the two cases to the Nigerian police and secret security service respectively, but to his knowledge, they arrested no one in connection to that and they continue to live in fear.

Another case involved Ismaila Afakallah, former head of Arewa Filmmakers Association, who felt the need to respond to the heightened "hate-sermons" against filmmakers by Islamists. He featured on a popular Freedom FM radio morning show *Barka da Hantsi* where he likened the activities of filmmakers to that of Friday prayer imams, pointing out that they both address congregations either in mosques or cinemas and convey "good messages" to them.⁵ This statement elicited harsh responses from some Islamists and their supporters. Some of them gave him an ultimatum to come back to the same programme to first withdraw his statement and then repent to Allah or face an undisclosed punishment. Afakallah told me that he refused to give into their threat because he was "legally prepared" to defend himself.⁶

Similarly, there was also a time Ali Baba appeared on a Freedom FM radio programme and discussed the activities of the filmmakers *vis-à-vis* their rejection by the Islamists. During the programme, he supported the filmmakers and repeated what Afakallah previously mentioned that film practitioners do the same work as 'ulamā' and imams.⁷ Like Afakallah, some Islamists scolded and threatened to deal with him.

⁴ See the Associated Press (AP). 3 January 1995. "Tension High After Muslims Accused of Beheading Christian." (NEXIS); *The Herald* [Glasgow]. 4 January 1995. "Kano Quelled After Beheading." (NEXIS)

⁵ I obtained the recorded program from the radio station and discussed it with the anchor, Salisu Baffayo.

⁶ Afakallah, Ismaila. Interview with the author

⁷ I obtained the recorded programme from Freedom FM radio.

Each of those incidences added to the existing tension in society and increased the likelihood of physical violence as both antagonising actors and their supporters remained resolute to their interests. This, however, happens alongside other socio-political and cultural factors that had bred thousands of miscreants out there waiting for any form of religious or political validation of violence from religious and political leaders to start attacking others and looting properties either in the name of religion or politics or both which often pair well in the region.

2. Sharia Reintroduction, Intolerance and Renewal of Ideological Antagonism through Kannywood

Sharia reintroduction in northern Nigeria in the year 2000 opened a new page in the intra-faith crisis between Islamists and filmmakers. The initial attempt by the Islamists was geared toward stopping the films completely in its hub — Kano state. That proved impossible for reasons connected to the globalisation and technological sophistication of the world, as well as legal pluralism and diversity of religious beliefs and ideologies in the country. Thus, the first Sharia administration in Kano adopted a specific religious censorship by establishing Kano State Censorship Board (KSCB) and Kano State Hisba Board (KSHB) to control the activities of the local filmmakers in line with Sharia law. The law that established them stated that they should be headed by prominent religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) appointed by the governor. This development empowered the Islamists with political wherewithal to strengthen their resistance against the Kannywood video industry.

When Kannywood started, criticism came from all Islamists irrespective of their ideological and theological differences. Their reaction was unanimous because, as mentioned earlier, they have a common aim of resisting the socio-cultural changes promoted through the Kannywood films. Despite this common aim, the voices of Islamists with a Salafi background represented by Shaykh Jafar Adam, Muhammad bin Uthman, Aminuddin Abubakar, and Abdallah Gadon-Kaya are louder through sermons. As such, the Salafists views are more articulated than that of their Sufi counterparts and thus the former formed dominant religious views about the activities of the Kannywood filmmakers. Moreover, the Salafists dominate the new censorship agencies established in the state and set the new Sharia rules controlling Kannywood based on their religious worldviews. This twist of events agitated the Sufis, and they became apprehensive that the common religious struggle was turning against them. Their fear became prominent when a Salafi head of KSCB, Ustaz Abubakar Rabo, entirely banned songs and dances among other things in the Kannywood movies. The Sufis viewed it as not only an attempt to control the filmmakers whom they both opposed, but by extension targeting their Sufi values as songs and dances, which are part of their rituals. On realising this, the Sufi *'ulamā'* repositioned themselves and started to reject Salafist dominance through Sharia censorship boards.

As Larkin (2009) noted, Salafism, also known as *Yan-Izala*, developed in northern Nigeria on the altar of the modern media technologies, particularly, radio, television and recorded cassettes. It spread across the region in the early 1960s *via* radio broadcast and recorded cassette, at the time Sufi *'ulamā'* rejected those new technologies for religious usage. At that time, several cases of violent attacks against the opposing religious groups including the media houses that supported them were reported (Umar 1993; Kane 1994; Larkin 2009; Ben Amara 2013). Therefore, after having firmly established themselves through popular (electronic) media, the Salafists knew the danger the local films may

portray if allowed unchecked in changing people's views as initiated by the Kannywood filmmakers. Thus, they became very active in sanctioning it in accordance with their creed.

With this fear in mind and by observing the way things unfold in the Sharia reimplementation, the Sufis suddenly started to take an unusual opposite stance. They started campaigning that film is originally Islamic as opposed to the initial collective view about Kannywood films that later became a dominant Salafi view. Some of them started preaching that filmmaking is even more Islamic than western *cum* modern culture and must be accepted by the northern Nigeria Sharia implementers. Sufi '*ulamā*' like Shaykh Dr. Yusuf Ali and Bazallah Nasiru Kabara espouse this view. They wanted to avoid the mistake they made in the 1960s and 1970s during which they rejected the new media as well as the need to tackle their rivals. This informed their newfound re-interpretation of the activities of the Kannywood filmmakers. They also viewed Kannywood as a lesser threat to their Sufi ideology than the growing Salafism and its dominance *via* media. This development led to a sharp division among the two in defining the new movie industry in accordance with their interests within the Sharia context, leading to a tense situation. Since KSCB and KSHB became instrumental in effecting whatever views the Islamists held in the context of their religious interests on Kannywood, different groups compete for their leadership. For example, when a Sufi Shaykh Bazallah, replaced Rabo as the head of KSCB, he undermined the Salafi beliefs instituted by his predecessor and replaced them with his own. Thus, the religious conflicts which were hitherto limited to filmmakers and Islamists, developed among the latter. They competed regarding whose view should be used to control the activities of the filmmakers. A development which led to the emergence of alternation of censorship implementation was based on the two polarised ideologies of Sufi-Salafi Sunni groups, tensions between the '*ulamā*' and their followers across the two divides.

Henceforth, the two-major opposing Sunni groups influence Kannywood movies and its Sharia law. For example, between 2009 and 2011 when Ustaz Rabo, a Salafi cleric, was heading KSCB, some people reproduced or rather translated a foreign film about Prophet Yusuf from its original Arabic to the Hausa language. The film became very popular among locals. Ustaz Rabo banned the film based on his theological view that it is wrong to represent any of Allah's prophets in a film. He ordered the confiscation of all its copies in circulation and arrested any person who continued to sell or patronise it. His reasons were rejected by Sufi '*ulamā*' not because of the economic violence against the filmmakers but because of ideological differences as articulated by Shaykh Qaribullah Nasiru Kabara:

To tell you the truth, the Censorship Board used religion as a pretext to ban that film. They use the excuse of representing Prophet Yusuf to deceive ignorant people. The truth of the matter is that, from where was that movie from? It was from Iran, and people in Kano Censorship Board have their ideology from Saudi Arabia; and Saudi Arabia is determined to execute a jihad, no, we should not call it jihad; Saudi Arabia is waging *yaki* [unholy war] against Iran and anything related to Iran in the whole world. That was their motivation to ban the film. It comes from Iran and people accepted it here because of its high quality, and compliance with the sharia. You will find it [the film] at that time in every household. I assured you, had it [the film] come from Saudi Arabia, nobody would utter a word against it. Therefore, there is a problem. KSCB need to enhance their

vision and open their chest [mind] to see beyond their short vision. If they could not, we hope one day we will have people there who will do the right thing.⁸

The above highlights the growing intolerance among the diverse religious interest groups in the media context. The Salafi head of KSCB uses the board to articulate his intolerance to others' religious views. Thereafter, the Sufis strived and took over the leadership of KSCB with the change of government in 2011 in the state. This renewed a historic clash of interests in the long-standing rivalry between the Nigerian Sufi, Salafi, and Shia Muslims.

Another example is the case of a Kannywood movie, *Ashabul-kahfi*, produced by Aminu Saira. He based his movie on a Qur'anic anecdote about some people and their dog that fled a polytheist and wicked king and sought refuge in a cave. Thus, Saira produced his movie based on his personal imagination of space and people that occupied it, and of course the imagination of some 'ulamā' that influences his Islamic beliefs and thinking. He symbolised pious people in his movie with a beard. He censored his movie with Kano KSCB during the tenure of Ustaz Rabo who is a Salafi. Shaykh Bazallah, a Sufi Shaykh and the successor of Ustaz Rabo, revisited the status of the *Ashabul-kahfi* movie alleging that it promotes Salafism and denigrates Sufism. He attempted to ban it the same way his predecessor banned Prophet Yusuf's film. He based his allegation on the view that there is no version of the *Ashabul-kahfi* parables that described them as wearing a beard. He accused the producers and those that censor it of promoting Salafism which he described as an "alien religion imposed upon northern Nigerian Sufi Muslim" and which they must resist.⁹

Moreover, this placed the filmmakers at an *impasse*. They are caught at a crossroads of local movie production, which initially challenges some instituted religious values and the divergent interests and power struggle between the Islamists. With this, the latter compromises the filmmakers by imposing their respective ideologies on them. They tend to become followers of either of the dominant ideologies not because they are convinced about them but, to save their own interests of making films. Yet they continue to pay the price of the clash between the Islamists from Sufi and Salafi camps, depending on the ideology of the gatekeeper. In other words, while the initial Islamists resistance against the filmmakers continues to run in the background, the latter also become victims of the ideological differences of the former as they fight each other through the leadership of the Censorship Board. The Islamists force the filmmakers to cross-carpet between religious views, depending on who controls the Censorship Board, the latter also stands the risk of having their already produced and officially licensed films revoked because of change of leadership at the Censorship Board, which also means a change of rules and policies. Thus, the filmmakers suffer multiple layers of structural violence because informed by stakes of some religious actors in society and the opportunity provided by religion (Sharia reimplementation) to achieve that.

3. Socio-economic and Political Violence: Un-employment, Destruction of Properties, Imprisonment and Persecution

Kannywood started as an entirely informal sector providing direct and indirect employment opportunities for over a million Muslim youth in northern Nigeria¹⁰ (also

⁸ Shaykh Qasiwini, Interview with Author, Kano, Nov. 24, 2014

⁹ Shaykh Bazallah, Interview with Author, Kano, Dec. 3, 2015.

¹⁰ Abdul-Aziz Ezet, Interview with Author, February 19, 2017, Kano, Nigeria.

see Fagge 2004; Jibril 2004; Ahmad 2004; Sheme 2010). According to Fagge (2004), it is the largest employment provider in northern Nigeria after *Achaba* (Motorcycle Taxi), which was also banned by the Sharia state, for religious and security reasons (see Adamu 2008). Many of the Kannywood employees I interviewed mentioned ‘employment’ as the primary reason for joining the industry before they later discovered some secondary and tertiary reasons. Thus, Kannywood became a leading direct and indirect employment provider for those youths whom the formal economic sector could not cater for.

When the Islamists resistance against Kannywood started, the latter contextually focused on protecting their religious views over the livelihood of those involved. Although most of the Islamists are aware that their actions would affect the livelihood of many youths, the former viewed that religious values must not be sacrificed for employment reasons.¹¹ Thus, filmmakers primarily struggled to save their means of livelihood and the investment they made in the thriving local entertainment industry.¹² However, due to the dominant and historic role of religion in northern Nigeria, the Islamists have more advantages over other socio-cultural groups including filmmakers. The religious capital (Bourdieu 2011) they possess, together with the ‘mediatic power of pulpit’ through which they influence the public, helped them to have a full grip on the political system of the region, which enables them to strengthen their resistance against Kannywood industry.



Street vendors in Kano selling Kannywood Movies. Photos taken by author

Even though it is a normative responsibility of any state to provide jobs to its citizens, many Kannywood filmmakers lost their jobs because of the activities of KSCB and KSHB, who confiscated and destroyed some of the films they produced. This cost the filmmakers and marketers huge amounts of money and jobs lost. For example, KSCB seized and destroyed whole copies of *Bakar Ashana* produced by Aminu Mai-lalle.

¹¹ Daurawa, Aminu; Kabara, Bazallah Nasiru, Abu Abdurrahman, Abubakar Interviews November, December 2014 and June 2015, Kano and Katsina, Nigeria. See also Adamu (2008) on Gender, *bisba*, and enforcement of morality in Northern Nigeria.

¹² Mai-lalle, Aminu; 3SP, Abubakar; Iyan-Tama, Hamisu interviews November 2014, September 2015, Kano and Jos, Nigeria.

Similarly, Hamisu Iyan-tama's film, *Tsintsija*, was not only banned after production but the producer was jailed for two years.¹³

Other cases of imprisonment of Kannywood filmmakers on a religious basis are that of Rabilu Musa Ibro, and Adamu Zongo. Many of the filmmakers who have suffered both socio-economic and physical violence viewed this as a deliberate attempt by the Islamists to silence their voices regarding social changes. One could understand this when Mai-lalle mentioned, "...I invest my life-saving income in producing my movie but they [Islamists] frustrated my efforts. It is a deliberate attempt to silence us but, I want to assure them that whether they like it or not we must keep producing films ... we will fight for our rights and freedom by all means"¹⁴. Some of them became so frustrated and were now possible recruits for any interest group capable of liberating them or even setting up their own liberation movements.

Amidst their sufferings, some of the filmmakers resorted to using religious songs to express their feelings. An example of this is when Aminu Ladan Ala led seven other singers to compose a song titled *basbunallahu wani imimal wakilu*—a phrase that means "Allah is sufficient for us; He is the best disposer of affairs [for us]". This prayer is usually invoked when one is in hardship and helpless. Ala and his colleagues called the song *al-qunut* (meaning a special prayer). They invoke Allah to send all sorts of calamities to their persecutors in the name of religion. The song landed them in prison. Police, under the instruction of Ustaz Rabo, arrested Ala in the late evening inside a bakery. He was tried and jailed at a special tribunal in the same night.¹⁵

The public, on the other hand, split into two. While some people are convinced through sermons that the holy war against Kannywood by the Islamists is for their own good, and even started to dislike the filmmakers, others, especially keen audiences of the movies, do not quite share the indignation. This is evident in the way some of the filmmakers were declared anti-Islam by the Islamist such as Rabilu Musa Dan Ibro, Adamu Zango, and Hamisu Iyan-tama became unexpected champions among young people. They display on their vehicles, particularly commercial buses, taxis, and motorcycles, as well as personal shops and kiosks, stickers bearing pictures of their preferred Kannywood stars. Moreover, according to many film marketers, banned Kannywood movies became bestsellers. The audiences prefer them because they want to show their solidarity to the 'persecuted' filmmakers. This dragged the film marketers into the circle as KSCB arrested and imprisoned many of them such as Naziru Mallam-kato, Sukairaju, and Madobi on the account that they were selling local movies not approved by the Sharia boards.¹⁶

4. Conversion Films and Reproduction of Intolerance Through Manipulated Movies

As McLuhan and Fiore (1967) coined that media is the message, cinema does not just communicate the message but influences the reception of the message (Hoover 1997a; 1997b; Hjavard 2008; Mazzarella 2004; 2009; Gordon 2015). The stance of Islamists on the Kannywood movies through the Sharia institutions led to its partial Islamisation as some filmmakers succumb to the pressure and interests of the Islamists. They produce

¹³ Iyan-Tama, interview with Author, November 18, 2014, Kano, Nigeria

¹⁴ Mai-lalle, Aminu interview with Author, November 25, 2014, Kano, Nigeria.

¹⁵ Ala, Aminu interview with Author, November 3, 2014, Kano, Nigeria.

¹⁶ Mallam-kato, Naziru interview with Author, May 9, 2015 Kano, Nigeria.

films to satisfy the interests of their censors. This reignites and inculcates intolerance through (mis)interpretation of texts to suit multiple and conflicting individuals and group interests. Krings (2005:1) noted that since the Sharia reintroduction in 2000 and sequel to the activities of some Islamists in the KSCB, Kannywood producers, took up the challenge and responded by inserting religious issues into their narratives, and by adding a new feature genre focusing on conversion to Islam. This genre is characterised by violent Muslim-pagan encounters, usually set in a mythical past, culminating in the conversion of the pagans”. He subsequently observed that several Kannywood movies depict such stories about conversion to Islam, “to give a religious flair to their products, a flair that resonates with the permeation of public culture with fundamentalist Islam” (2008:1).

In addition to this, intra-faith disputes between the Islamists reared its head by contesting how such movies should visually depict conversion to Islam. There is disagreement on whose ideology should the interpretation of such conversion films promote as observed earlier in *Ashabul-kahfi* (directed by Aminu Saira). Even though it was about conversion, Shaykh Bazallah accused the producer of promoting a Salafi agenda by depicting the Muslim warriors and heroes as Salafists with a beard.

While this happens, all the Islamists and Kannywood producers interviewed have agreed on the efficacy of Kannywood films (irrespective of whether it is religious or secular) in changing people’s behaviour, and thus the need to control it. In this regard, imposing certain religious beliefs in the films and aiding its propagation among millions of audiences in the region and beyond reproduce people with such perspectives premised on extremism and intolerance, which are the major causes of religious violence.

Conclusion

After establishing a nexus between religion, media and violence, the paper discussed roles played by various actors through Kannywood movies in mediating and mediatizing religious ideas, experiences, and other socio-cultural issues. It analysed the Kannywood movie phenomenon within the context of a “structural” dimension of violence (Galtung 1990). It showed how people were using indigenous movies to contest Islamists’ hegemony and how the former subdued the latter through religious censorship that attracted consequences as fines, jail terms, and other forms of violence (real and symbolic). Similarly, it showed how the same Kannywood phenomenon was used to reignite an age-old interfaith rivalry between Sufi and Salafi Muslims. Members of those groups, who are the censors, use censorship for their respective interests. More importantly, the paper showed how the Islamists, through the trend, compromised the filmmakers to make ‘acceptable’ religiously inspired movies to appease one of the rival groups in charge of gatekeeping and how that generates more tensions that are religious in nature. Hence, we see various interest groups and actors jostling to bring down one’s opponents through manipulation of power and opportunity provided by a state structure based on religion. Popular video culture (Kannywood) is analysed as an avenue for promoting and imposing ideological views and perspectives to suit individual and groups’ religious interests, a situation that caused disrespect, maltreatment, and denigration of fellows, as well as creating an environment ripe for violent reactions from the perceived oppressed. This was illustrated in the case of Sufi against Salafi, the Islamists among themselves, and between Islamists and filmmakers. We also see another aspect of

violence as an act of aggression (as one against another that resists)—a turbulent state resulting in injuries and the destruction of property belonging to the filmmakers.

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Ethiopia's Ahabash Path to Religious Moderation and Countering Extremism: Pitfalls and Discontents

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Abstract

Ethiopia is a religiously diverse state with a history of largely cordial relationships among religious groups except from the occasional confrontation and mistrust. However, the relatively peaceful coexistence seems to be losing ground for intolerance and religious extremism in recent years. Both inter- and intra-religious conflicts are not uncommon to observe. Intra-religious conflicts within the Muslim community are surfacing mainly between the Sufi- and Salafi-oriented groups either along doctrinal lines or competition for controlling Islamic institutions. Equally worrying is the role of the government in 'mediating the conflict'. Sufism is now gaining momentum around government policy circles to be promoted as a strategy for countering religious extremism. Sufis represented by Ahabash are now receiving 'undue government favour' often at the exclusion of the Salafis who are accused of harbouring religious intolerance and extremist ideas. In this regard, the government is running the risk of embracing an 'official Islam' viewed as moderate, apolitical and correct at the exclusion of extremist, political and 'distorted Islam' quite in contradiction with the constitutional principle of secularism. This paper examines the threats of religious extremism in post-1991 Ethiopia and interrogates the government policies and practices taking into account the regional and geopolitical contexts. It identifies the actors, their roles, power positions and mobilisation strategies in the conflict.

KEY WORDS: Ahabash, Sufism, Salafism, Countering Extremism, Religious Moderation, Secularism

Introduction

Geographically, Ethiopia is located in East Africa – sharing borders with Sudan and South Sudan in the west, Kenya in the south, Somalia and Djibouti in the east and Eritrea in the north. It has a population of close to one hundred million. It is characterised by an extraordinary diversity composed of several ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural communities. It is also an early home for all major monotheistic

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world religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). The current religious composition is about 63% Christian and 34% Muslim. The remaining being divided among indigenous and other religious groups (CSA, 2007). Its religious past is characterised by both consensual and conflictual relationships (Hussein, 2006). People to people relations between Christians and Muslims were generally cordial but the State's attitude – at least up to 1974 – towards all religions other than Orthodox Christianity was unfavourable and negative. Islam was treated unfairly during the imperial regimes where all the rulers envisioned religious homogenisation as their ultimate goal. The *Derg* regime that succeeded the last imperial regime in 1974 was not any better for minority religious communities in particular and for all religions in general. It was anti-religious in orientation and its goal was 'constructing a religious-free socialist Ethiopia'.

The 1991 regime change ushered a new era of religious freedom and equality. The 1995 Constitution anchored the principle of separation of State and religion and guaranteed freedom of religion. However, the practice on the ground demonstrated that a great deal remained to be done to implement the constitutional promises. Religious groups are complaining now and then about government's encroachment in their religious affairs contrary to the principle of secularism. The government, in its turn, is complaining about the growing influence of religious extremism with the ambition of establishing a religious government in Ethiopia. For tackling the problem, it devised different mechanisms. Among others, the government is actively engaging in supporting those religious groups which are supposed to be apolitical and tolerant. In particular, the government is involved in the internal debates and conflicts among the Muslims – as manifested in controlling the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (hereafter, EIASC) leadership – between the Sufi- and Salafi-oriented Muslims in favour of the Sufis as they are dubbed 'moderate and apolitical'. Hence, its policies and strategies mainly focus on promoting and encouraging Sufism with complete disregard for the constitutional provision of 'strict separation between State and religion' (art 11). This has resulted in a backlash effect where large Muslim crowds protested, particularly after 2011, against what they call 'government meddling in purely religious affairs'.

However, the government denied it as simple allegation without concrete evidence. According to different government sources (Addis Raey, 2012:21-23; *Yebaimanot*, 2011), it is only the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (popularly called Mejlis, hereafter, Mejlis) that invited Ahbash from Lebanon and organised their training. The role of the government was limited to delivering speeches related to the constitutional rights and duties of believers at the beginning of the training and providing security for the trainees and trainers (*ibid*).

Against the backdrop of accusation and counter-accusation, this paper investigates the extent to which the government was involved in the promotion and dissemination of Ahbash (Sufi) religious teaching and how plausible the claims of the activists are and appraises the fear of the government regarding religious extremism in the country, taking into account the geopolitical and global contexts. The paper is organised into three major parts, in addition to the brief reflections on the distinctions between Sufi and Salafi Muslims. The first part will discuss the strategies employed by States, other than Ethiopia, in East Africa for countering religious extremism and the influence of the US government over such countries' policies and strategies. The second part will thoroughly elaborate the Ahbash issue: both its origin and development in Ethiopia and outside. The subsequent part discusses the coming of Ahbash to Ethiopia and the reaction of Ethiopian Muslims. In doing so, I will try to first identify the actors involved and their

interest of its coming and investigate the Muslims' responses in line with the legal provisions of the country. Finally, I will conclude by appraising the fears of Muslims in the religious meddling of the government and the fears of the government for religious extremism and the drawbacks of its counter-extremism strategies.

Sufi – Salafi Distinctions: Some Reflections

For the sake of clarity, Sufism and Salafism are not separate sects within Islam but differ only in their interpretation. Both of them support the necessity of applying *shari'a* law (Islamic law) but the focus of the former is on individual devotion and direct relationship between man and God. In most cases, Sufis reject the notion of violence to achieve their goals as opposed to the Salafis who believe that believers should be agents of social change to improve worldly affairs (Muedini, 2015). The Salafis advocate that 'a polity governed by *shari'a* (*Dar ul Islam*)' is necessary to bring about justice in a society (Abdi, 2015). In effect, the group advocates that Salafi-dominance in all aspects of life (including politics) is a necessary condition to implement their convictions (ibid).

Originally, the Sufi practice started during the time of the Prophet Mohammed where his follower's drew inspiration from his words and deeds (Engineer, 2010). They closely watched his activities and lived around him imitating his practices called *Ahl al-suffa* (ibid). These were considered to be the first Sufi Muslim community in the world but later divided into several schools of thought (ibid)². Spiritualism is the main focus of the Sufis and perfecting their inner egos by minimising greed for materialism is their ultimate goal. Those who achieved the highest level of spiritualism through religious learning could be role models for the masses. Moreover, Sufis are receptive to the cultural norms of society enabling integration into the religion of Islam. In other words, they are accommodative of local cultures through Islam where it enabled them to attract a large number of followers. Their practice has received warm support from multicultural societies across the world (Engineer, 2010).

With regard to politics, the Sufis preach non-involvement in political affairs by gearing their efforts towards spiritualism. They engage in appealing for love instead of power. Sufism preaches to remain peaceful and apolitical (Hanieh, 2011:181). This, however, does not mean that all Sufis have the same position on the role of religion in politics as some do advocate active involvement depending on the circumstances of time and space. In some instances, the Sufis may be even more violent and politically active in defending their interests and justify violence to fight against authorities in power. Their fierce resistance against the colonial regime has been witnessed both in Africa and the Middle East. The Sufi-oriented Mahdist Movement of Sudan and Somalia directed against the British colonial power were good examples (Dereje and Bruce Lawrence, 2014:19). The Mahdist Movement, led by a Sufi leader Mohammed Ahmad, who proclaimed himself Mahdi (one who is guided by Allah), expressed its social, political and religious grievances against the British colonial rule at the end of the 19th c (Erlich, 1994:65). Interestingly, the Mahdists established an Islamic State of Sudan after independence modelled on the 7th century Islamic State of the Prophet (ibid). Mohammed Abdille Hassan, nicknamed by his detractors as 'Mad Mullah', who came from the Sufi community of Somalia was ferocious in fighting against the British colonisers (Furnish, 2013:10) through an Islamic *jihad* (Erlich, 1994). One of the most

² The four schools of thought in Islam are the Shafi, Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali.

renowned Sufi Centres in Ethiopia, Jamma Nigus in Wollo, had witnessed the most violent conflict between the Sufi-oriented Muslims and the Christian King of Ethiopia during the 20th century. Its leader Sheikh Mohammed Shafi, who rejected the legitimacy of the Christian King to rule his Muslim population, declared *jihad* against the King and resulted in the devastation of the area by the two forces (Dereje and Bruce Lawrence, 2014).

The Salafi groups, on the other hand, emerged as opponents to the practice of Sufism. The Salafis perceive the Sufis as ‘corrupt and spoiler of the true Islamic teaching’. The word Salafi comes from *al-salaf* which means ‘pious predecessors’ signifying the return to ‘pure Islam’ (Moussalli, 2009:11). The beliefs of the Salafis entail that some of the practices of the Sufis such as visiting tombs, saint veneration and the conflation of Islam with cultural practices spoils the religion. They consider such practices as *shirk* (associating partners with Allah), which is one of the greatest sins in Islam (Engineer, 2010). By doing so, the Salafis are more exclusionist; people who practice such activities are rejected from the Muslim *ummah* (community) and labelled as *kufar* (non-believer). They, instead, advocate for the return of the Muslim *ummah* to pure Islam based on the teachings of Quran and Hadith (Moussalli, 2009).

It is obvious that ‘an ideology of purity’ leads to extremism where others supposed to be non-pure face denunciation attack (both verbal and physical). The Salafis, in most cases, consider other groups as non-pure and by implication *kufar*. They are anti-pluralist in orientation and religiously intolerant of other believers (Esposito, 2010:77). They instead work to promote and impose their own version of Islam on others. This strategy of imposing their religion as a mandate for fulfilling the commands of God obviously entails violence and extremism (ibid). For this reason, the appeal of Sufism for spirituality, tolerance, peaceful coexistence with other religions and cultures, and their little zeal for politics attracts many policy-makers and politicians across the world to encourage and promote their practices and teachings often at the exclusion of Salafism. The multicultural nature of today’s world even made Sufism an ‘ideal candidate’ for States to work with and promote its ideologies and teachings.

Promoting Sufism for Countering Religious Extremism

The 9/11 terrorist attack ushered in a new era of global terrorism and its logical consequence of employing methods of counter-terrorism strategies by state and non-state actors. As number one victim of this attack, the US took the lead in countering terrorism through forming what is termed as ‘an alliance of the willing’ (Esposito, 2010). To avoid the flavour of the war as West (Christian) vs. Muslim, the US policy-makers developed a strategy of recruiting Muslim partners (at state and non-state level) who are believed to be ‘moderate, tolerant and friendly with Western governments and the Western way of life’ (ibid). Many have come up with an idea that defeating terrorism by military might alone could not be possible unless some sort of cooperation is made with moderate Muslims against hard-liner extremists (Muedini, 2015). Hence, they started to sponsor ‘tolerant and friendly Muslims’ for their ideology to prevail over extremists. In this regard, Sufism became the preferred candidate for them as an ‘ideological weapon’ to attack the Salafi extremists. Taking into account the leading political and economic role of the United States, it should come as no surprise that its policy of promoting Sufism has influenced other States’ policies and actions in handling their Muslim

communities and countering religious extremism. Many countries, if not all, followed suit.

Countering Religious Extremism in East Africa

The governments of Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia initiated policies and strategies for supporting the activities of Sufis in their fight against terrorism and in their bid to secure US-aid ‘invested for rehabilitating Sufi shrines and teachings across the world’. One of the counter-terrorism strategies of the US government in this region is to “identify mainstream and Sufi Muslim sectors and helping them propagate moderate interpretations of Islam and delegitimize terrorism” (Rand Corporation Report, 2009: xii). The US government encourages the above mentioned countries to support and sponsor Sufi-practices (Furnish, 2013). Hence, sponsoring Sufism became a government ‘choice and agenda’ in these States (Abdi, 2015). They invested their best in promoting Sufi education, securing Islamic organisations to be filled by Sufi leaders and encouraging Sufi shrines to flourish through State sponsored rehabilitation programmes.

The governments of Djibouti and Somalia, for example, have governmental religious agencies to register and monitor religious activities (Rand Corporation, 2009:30). Both authorities discourage the activities of Wahhabis and have strategies for subsidising mosques and paying salaries for *imams* who are supposed to be moderate and Sufi (ibid). The government of Kenya organised and hosted several regional and international Sufi conferences in its jurisdictions. A three-day conference was held in the city of Mackinnon in August 2015 by Sufi clerics from Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia and Democratic Republic of Congo named as *The International Sufi Conference for East Africa* (Abdi, 2015:2). The conference was organised with the purpose of countering religious extremism and finding alternatives to the radical stands of the Salafi groups in the region. Among other things, the participants reached an agreement to encourage and promote Sufism in the region to undermine the activities of the radicals and counter religious extremism through their respective governments’ support. The government of Ethiopia, using Mejlis as a surrogate, involved in the coming and promotion of Ahbash (Sufi) in the country, angered the Muslim community and precipitated sustained protests as shall be discussed below.

Ahbash and the Ethiopian Muslim Protest—Ahbash: Origin and Development

Ahbash is believed to have been established in Lebanon in 1930 under the leadership of Sheikh Ahmad al-Ajuz as a philanthropic project and spiritualist movement officially named the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP) (Hamzeh, 1996:3). The association was later overtaken by the followers of an Ethiopian Sheikh named Abdullah al-Harari or al-Habeshi³, to signify his origin, and popularly became Ahbash. Al-Harari presided over the association starting from 1983 following the death of al-Ajuz. Al-Harari was born around 1910 in the city of Harar.

The contemporary rivalry between the Ahbash and Salafi/Wahhabi groups in Ethiopia is rooted in the ancient Islamic city of Harar (Kabha and Haggai Erlich, 2012).

³ The term *al-Ahbash* is denoted in Arabic to indicate the country of origin of the leader of the organisation.

Harar was incorporated into the Christian-dominated Empire of Ethiopia in 1887 following the defeat of its leader Emir Abdullahi at the battle of Chelenqo by Menelik II (1889-1913) (Bahru, 2002). The incorporation of Harar into Ethiopia had far-reaching implications for Harar, especially on its Islamic character and teaching. As the Christian-dominated administration, the rulers from Addis Ababa were not happy to see a strong Islamic teaching centre in their kingdom. They rather worked to weaken the Islamic influence in all parts of Ethiopia. Emperor Menelik – though ‘accommodative of religious differences’ – was well-known for his policy of inducement of Muslim elites through incentive and persuasion (Markakis, 1974). Those moderate Muslims who accepted his kingship and Christian-dominated administration as legitimate were rewarded with titles and maintaining their leadership positions (Clapham, 2013). He, however, was harsher in the administration of Harar because of stiff resistance from the local Muslim population and was aggressive in weakening the Islamic identity of Harar (Clapham, 2013). Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974), like his predecessor, did his best to divide the city’s Muslim population along doctrinal lines to weaken their political leverage. It was in this atmosphere that the two rival Islamic teachings emerged under the manipulation of the central imperial government (*Yemuslimoch Guday*, 2012). In short, the two rival groups played into the hands of the Emperor and served the interests of the Empire to weaken the unity of Muslims.

Their rift was further aggravated by the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1941) with the involvement of external actors, including Saudi Arabia. The brief invasion of the country by the Italian fascist forces had stimulated many Muslims to carry-out a religious pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. For their infamous ‘divide and rule policy’, the Italian fascist forces encouraged Muslims to practise their religion knowing that Muslims were long marginalised by the Christian emperors (Hussein, 2006). As a result of their exposure to the outside Muslim *ummah*, many Harari Muslims came under the influence of Salafi/Wahhabi teaching that focuses mainly on Islamic scriptures and the literal interpretation of the Quran rejecting ‘culture-oriented and un-Islamic Sufi-practices’. As a consequence, they started an Islamic revival in the city of Harar by purging Islam of ‘un-Islamic practices’ such as saint veneration, celebration of *menlid* (birthday of the Prophet), acts of intercession and visiting tombs.

The two groups began to fight for Islamic revivalism and independence in their own understanding of ‘Islamic independence’. One of such groups (Sufi/Ahbash) was led by Abdullah al-Harari and the other (Salafi/Wahhabi) by Sheikh Yusuf Abdulrahman al-Harari. Based on Mustafa Kabha and Haggai Erlich (2012), Sheikh Yusuf Abdulrahman al-Harari was a Saudi-educated Wahhabi advocator who often involved in the verbal war against Ahbash. In some other sources, however, Yusuf Abdulrahman al-Harari was seen as a ‘liberator of Islam and Harar from moral depreciation and some repugnant practices’ following its occupation by Italy. As stated by *Yemuslimoch Guday* (2012), Sheikh Yusuf went to Saudi Arabia during the Italian occupation but returned in 1939. Upon arrival, he realised that Harar was completely changed. Her Islamic character was replaced with practices which are ‘repugnant to public (Islamic) morality’. Drinking alcohol, prostitution, worshipping shrines and chewing *chat* became ‘accepted norms’ in the city. To deal with such problems, he established a national Islamic association called *al-Jami'a Wetenil Islamiya*. Its major purpose was to alleviate the problem of moral laxity among the people of Harar and to return to it its former Islamic reputation. He then continued by establishing other religious and academic schools and institutions by collecting money from local Muslim residents (*ibid*). However, the association faced tough resistance from Sheikh Abdullah al-Harari who had active support from the

imperial regime of Emperor Haile Selassie (*Yemuslimoch Guday*, 2012:273). Abdullah al-Harari was on the side of the Emperor in the fight against the so-called Wahhabi groups. Some sources indicate that he was an active collaborator with the Christian-dominated imperial regime to suppress the Muslims of Harar. He was accused of constantly spying on the Muslim community and supplying information for the Christian Emperor about the activities of various Islamic institutions and schools operating in the city as if they were plotting against the existing regime (*Yemuslimoch Guday*, 2012). Nonetheless, he and his followers denied the accusation and in turn they accused Sheikh Yusuf and his followers of being instruments of the Haile Selassie government by suppressing Muslims (Kabha and Haggai Erlich, 2006:522).

With a varied degree of influence and collaboration with successive Ethiopian governments, the two rivals came into conflict afresh in the 2011 Ahabash controversy where the incumbent government is alleged to have been involved on the side of Abdullah al-Harari for 'the indoctrination of Ethiopian Muslims with Ahabash religious ideology' (Yuunus, 2013). Despite the allegation, the Ethiopian government denied its 'direct role' in the invitation of Ahabash Islamic scholars from Lebanon (Addis Raey, 2012). But it stressed that, the government had legitimate security concerns related to religious extremism and terrorism, particularly from its neighbours such as Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea (Ministry of Information, 2002) leading it to watch closely the activities of religious groups.

The Coming of Ahabash to Ethiopia and Actors Involved

Broadly speaking, there are three major actors involved in the coming and promotion of Ahabash religious ideology in Ethiopia. These are: Mejlis, the Ethiopian government and US government.

The Role of Mejlis

Did Mejlis really want 'to do business' from the importation and sponsoring of Ahabash by national and international actors? Certainly, it is very difficult to provide a precise answer of 'Yes' or 'No' to the above question. What makes it more difficult is, for many of the top leadership of Mejlis, that the researcher posed questions such as, 'whether Mejlis has been involved in importing and sponsoring Ahabash'; almost all 'categorically rejected this as a false accusation and replied with similar responses to that of the government'. Many of them rejected the accusation and are of the opinion that 'Ahabash is part of *nebaru islimina* – indigenous Islam' (Azam, 2012). Sheikh Azam⁴, said that:

It is called *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah*, which was part of Ethiopian Islam from the very beginning and I don't know from where they [referring to the Muslims' Solution Finding Committee] brought the name Ahabash. We planned the training only to counter religious extremism. When there is religious extremism, it is our [Mejlis's] responsibility to provide training for our community about religious tolerance and educating Muslims about the basic tenets of their religion. If there is anything done contrary to the *deen* (religion) in the training, they can complain about it. But I believe nothing wrong has been done. They are simply

⁴ Interview conducted by the researcher with Sheikh Azam Yusuf, Vice President of Mejlis, in Addis Ababa on 22 April 2012.

disseminating ‘white lie’ as if a new religion called Ahabash has come to Ethiopia through Mejlis and are confusing the lay Muslims. They are mobilizing the Muslim community against the government as if the government were involving in religious affairs.

For Sheikh Azam, religious extremism is the result of a ‘lack of religious knowledge’ and hence Mejlis was interested to fill that ‘knowledge gap’ in the Muslim community through training. The above speech of the Vice President of Mejlis is almost similar to what the Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi had said just five days previously (17 April 2012). Some of the Prime Minister’s speeches were repeated word-by-word by Mejlis leaders. The similarity of the explanations given by the two bodies shows the presence of an overlapping interest over promoting Ahabash and fear of Wahhabism. The Vice President further said that, “we [Mejlis] invited the government to teach about the constitutional provisions in the training since we believe that constitutional knowledge is important for the Muslim community to defend themselves and know their rights and duties”.

Notwithstanding the official rhetoric, the above question can be answered through examining the activities of Mejlis with regard to Ahabash and investigating its letters written for the US Embassy in Addis Ababa appealing for support to fight religious extremism in Ethiopia. Starting from the mid-1990s, Mejlis leaders apparently faced stiff competition for power and legitimacy from the Salafi-oriented Muslim activists. They are criticised for corrupt practices and gross incompetency in leading the Muslim *ummah* of Ethiopia (Jemal, 2012). Young Muslim scholars and activists complain about the current Mejlis leadership of a lack of spiritual and secular knowledge to enable them to lead the Muslim community (Jemal, 2012: 74). Most of them are far less educated in both areas compared with the young, well acquainted with religious knowledge and assertive Muslims. One Muslim commentator expresses his wonder “if it is possible to find a single individual from Mejlis leaders who completed grade twelve in their secular academic career and know about their religion except reading the Quran” (*Yemuslimoch Guday*, 2012:164). Their low academic and religious profile obviously undermined their acceptance by the Muslim public in general and the young Muslim elites in particular. Those young educated Muslims are very active in Islamic *da’awa* and are well connected with the Muslim *ummah* through modern communication technologies (internet and televangelism) and satellite Islamic media such as Africa TV. They are very persuasive and appealing to the younger generation compared with the old and very passive leadership. The leadership was unable to resist the pressure from Muslim protesters chanting every Friday after *Juma’a salat* – ‘Mejlis Yivegedal, Abay Yigedebal!’ – Mejlis shall be removed, Nile shall be dammed!’ Being attacked as ‘illegitimate’ by the Muslim protesters and the religious activists, the option on the ground for the leadership was to find support and strengthen its alliance against what it calls Wahhabi extremists. The leadership repeatedly accuses its opponents as extremists and instigators of inter- and intra-religious conflicts.

In one of the confidential documents of the US Embassy in Addis Ababa (2008) entitled “*Countering Wahabi Influence in Ethiopia*” released by WIKILEAKS, it is stated that, “the Council (Mejlis) approached the Embassy officials to get support in its fight against Wahhabism”⁵. One of the strategies of the Council, as presented to the Embassy, was to

⁵ http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ADDISABABA1672_a.html. Last date accessed, 22 June 2014.

work for the revival of Sufi shrines in different parts of the country and encouraging Muslims to participate in the celebration of *mevlid* – as both practices are under pressure from the Wahhabi groups. The Council goes on by saying to the Embassy officials that, ‘the EIASC is now all Sufi’ and hence appealed to the Embassy to ‘develop trust on it as a reliable partner’ in the fight against Wahhabism. The Embassy in turn welcomed the decision of Mejlis and even expressed its concern for the Ethiopian government to share the fears of Mejlis to take care in the “selection of future leaders of the Council to be Sufis” (ibid).

In the final analysis, it is fair to argue that Mejlis leadership was determined ‘to make both concrete and intangible business in the international game of promoting Sufism’. Though its leadership is unstable, especially due to the opposition and protests from its ‘own constituencies – Muslims’, some of its leaders appeared to be ‘credible partners’ with the sponsors of the Sufi order – particularly to the US Embassy in Addis Ababa. It successfully bought a card of loyalty to the US in order to be recognised as an important ‘non-state actor’ worth cooperating with to win its war against terrorism and religious extremism in East Africa (Furnish, 2013). Ahabash, siding itself with Sufism, has gained ‘international credibility’. For Mejlis, therefore, aligning with Ahabash is indirectly aligning itself with the US and Ethiopian governments.

The Role of the Ethiopian Government

In the recent Muslim-government controversy over the issue of Ahabash, there was no political figure in Ethiopia that defended Ahabash as publicly as the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi did. As a reaction to strong opposition from different sectors of the Muslim community from home and Diaspora, in what they call ‘forceful indoctrination of Ethiopian Muslims with an ‘alien and heretical’ Ahabash ideology’, he, perhaps in what resembles an emotional speech, said that;

The allegation [from the Salafis] that, ‘the government brought Ahabash to Ethiopia’, for me, is inappropriate. Because, first; ‘Ahabash is not a foreign religion as such’. It was a Sufi belief taught by the Ethiopian Sheikh called Abdullah al-Harari in Lebanon (since he was unable to teach and preach in his own country Ethiopia). Second, Mejlis leadership brought Ahabash believing that ‘it has a similar belief system with the Ethiopian Muslim population’. [Therefore], can we (as a government) stop them? Even, if Ahabash is a newcomer, can we prohibit them from coming to Ethiopia? If we can, why don’t we prohibit the Salafis themselves since they are newcomers? (Meles Zenawi, 17 April 2012 – Author’s translation).

The Ahabash, advertising themselves as ‘beacons of religious moderation, ardent opponents of extremism and violence, supporters of separation of Islam from politics and proponents of peaceful coexistence with other religious communities’⁶ appealed to many governments of the world obsessed with religious extremism, violence and terrorism. Its message is even more appropriate to Ethiopia because of its ‘blood ties’ with the country. One of the reasons stated above that the Prime Minister defended Ahabash was also directly related to its renowned leader Abdullah al-Harari being of Ethiopian descent. Other States might support Ahabash for its moderate stand and co-

⁶ <http://www.aicp.org>. Last date accessed, 14 June 2012.

operational approach. In Ethiopia, another factor comes into play – his descent, of course, in addition and because of its ‘tolerant values’.

Based on the views of many Muslim activists, the Ethiopian government is the most powerful actor for the coming into and dissemination of Ahabash’s teaching in Ethiopia. Yuunus (2013:35) calls it as ‘Ahabashism campaign’ where government officials involved in the campaign on the side of Mejlis leaders. Ahmedin Jebel, a member and public relation of the Muslims’ Solution Finding Committee⁷, tried to elaborate signs of government intervention through promoting Ahabash. He said that:

The role of the government begins with supporting and promoting Ahabash’s ideology in its parliamentary discussion. Top government officials told us through state media that – to the extent we assume that these politicians are Sheikhs – ‘Ahabash is *nebaru islimina* (indigenous Islam)’. The Ministry of Federal Affairs also participated in the promotion of Ahabash in the name of being invited by Mejlis and creating awareness (Press Release, June 2012).

The political passiveness of Ahabash, the pressures from the United States of America to de-radicalise Muslims through the encouragement of Sufism and the repeated appeal of Mejlis for countering the threats of Wahhabism might have contributed to the Ethiopian government becoming involved in the matter in different capacities. What seems even more attractive for the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government from the teachings of Ahabash is their rhetoric for the support of the principle of secularism and the role of religion in politics. The government of Ethiopia often criticises the teachings of Salafis/Wahhabis as extremist and considers this doctrine as ‘a threat to the national security and stability of the country’ (*Yebaimanot*, 2011). The association of the al-Qaeda group, an internationally recognised terrorist group, with the teachings of Salafi/Wahhabi ideology often boosted the fear of the government regarding Salafism. The late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi (17 April 2012 Parliamentary speech), once said that, “though all Salafis are not members of al-Qaeda, all al-Qaeda cells found in Ethiopia (mainly in Bale and Arsi – Oromia Region) are Salafis”. The logical consequence of this accusation would be undermining the teachings of Wahhabi and its presence in the Ethiopian soil. It is also quite expected for the government to securitise Salafism and work against this group either through direct confrontation or indirectly by replacing its teaching with ‘moderate versions of Islam’.

In fact, as I have indicated above, in the presence of security threats over Ethiopia mainly from neighbouring States, it would be quite reasonable for the government to fear religious radicalisation for destabilising the peace and stability of the State. Muslim-Christian conflicts are also observed in some parts of the country such as Jimma, Gondar, Wollo and Illu Ababora mainly attributed to the ‘reformist’ Salafi groups and fundamentalist Takfiri group (Ostebo, 2010). However, equally worrying is ‘the policy designed by the government’ for countering extremism and religious radicalisation. ‘Religious moderation training’ through the involvement of government offices certainly challenges the constitutional principle of separation of State and religion. In whatever capacity (e.g. facilitation), whether the government was invited by a religious institution (such as Mejlis) and whatever the purposes to be achieved (religious moderation and countering extremism) – acting in contravention to the constitutional principles of

⁷ This was a Committee which was organised in January 2012 with 17 members to seek a solution from the government for the problems of the Muslim community related to Mejlis leadership and the Ahabash controversy.

secularism (art 11) and freedom of religion (art 27 of the 1995 FDRE Constitution) leads to regression for the respect of these principles. It also creates a strong perception among the Muslim populace that ‘the government is creating an official Islam (Ahbash) intended to correct a form of Islam dubbed and distorted (Salafism/Wahhabism)’. This in turn creates a rift between different religious doctrines and aggravates sectarian conflict to threaten peace and stability which the government is sought to curb.

Muslim Protests Against Ahbash

It goes without saying that, religious freedom is guaranteed in the 1995 FDRE Constitution and there is no way for Ethiopian Muslims to oppose the teaching of a certain religious creed, dogma or doctrine. Accordingly, Ahbash as a religious sect or doctrine has the constitutional right to propagate its teaching in Ethiopia. Anyone who reads the constitutional provisions of the country (art 11 together with art 27) requires no further explanation to understand that freedom of religion and secularism are the core principles of the Ethiopian State and government. The absence of a State religion and the non-interference of State in religious affairs plus the freedom of religion and belief for everyone (particularly the freedom from coercion) are self-explanatory. The State has no ‘business’ in religions in so far as they undertake their activities within the legal framework of the State. No legal ground to interfere in their internal workings and doctrinal or any other differences. It cannot promote or demote a certain religion. Likewise, religious institutions and believers can undertake their own religious activities within the legal framework of the State. Believers have the right to establish institutions of religious education and administration in order to propagate and organise their religion (art 27(3)). These rights are also guaranteed by various international legal instruments such as UDHR and ICCPR which Ethiopia ratified as an integral part of its legal system (art 9(4) and art 13(2)). In this regard, it could not be the business of the State and government whether a certain religious group comes or goes as far as it fulfils legal requirements. Similarly, it should not be the business of a religious group, indigenous or exotic, to prohibit other religious group from undertaking religious activities. It is also the freedom of individuals to choose their own religion from the available religious market (home or abroad) without being coerced (art 27(1)).

Based on the constitution of Ethiopia, Ahbash, as a separate religious sect, has the right to propagate and disseminate its belief. It can organise itself using its own financial resources, institutions and worshipping places to disseminate its religious ideology. As many of the members of the Muslims’ Solution Finding Committee explained in a press conference held in June 2012, the Muslim protest has nothing to do with opposing the constitutional rights of other religious groups. Yasin Nuru, one of the members of the Committee stressed that, the protest under the banner of ‘*Ahbash Yimegedal*’ was only meant to “remove Ahbash from our forefathers’ mosques and other religious institutions, including Mejlis. It does not mean that we are demanding to expel Ahbash from Ethiopia” (Press Release, Yasin Nuru, June 2012, – Author’s translation).

Adem Kamil Faris said; “Ahbash can disseminate its religious teaching as the constitution guarantees for that. No one can prevent Ahbash from doing its religious propagation. The Committee opposes only the institutions (State and religious) that force us to accept and implement Ahbash’s philosophy – not Ahbash”. Sultan Hajji Aman, another member of the Committee, said that; “what is not acceptable for us is the imposition of Ahbash by Mejlis and the government to change our religion” (Press Release, Sultan Hajji Aman, June 2012, – Author’s translation). Tahir Abdulkadir, also

stated his views saying that; “as we have the constitutional right to teach our religion, Ahabash has also the same right. We cannot oppose it but what we opposed is the imposition” (Press Release, Tahir Abdulkadir, June 2012, – Author’s translation).

From the above speeches of the members of the Muslims’ Solution Finding Committee, it is understandable that Muslims could but would not demand the removal of Ahabash as a separate religious creed operating in Ethiopia since doing this is tantamount to violating the constitution of the country. Instead, what they opposed was its sponsorship by Mejlis and Ministry of Federal Affairs (MOFA) under the pretext of countering extremism and promoting religious tolerance. The Committee members collectively denied that none of their narratives, behaviour and action favours the establishment of an Islamic government in Ethiopia nor has it a ‘hidden political agenda’ to overthrow the government through acts of violence. They argue that, all the demands are purely religious and also constitutional with no reference to *shari’a* rule or controlling political power.

However, government’s responses to the questions from Muslims are too simplistic, inaccurate and inappropriate. Many of the government policies and practices are marked by antithetic between ‘bad and good, tolerant and intolerant, moderate and extremist’. By doing so, the option for promoting the practice of Sufism (supposed to be tolerant, apolitical and good) and encouraging Sufi-oriented Muslims to occupy important leadership positions in Mejlis has been ‘on the table’ for countering religious extremism and violence. This has resulted in the deep involvement, not to say intervention, of government in ‘purely religious matters’ which the principles of secularism and freedom of religion did not warrant.

Conclusion

Government and religious institutions may work together for achieving certain common purposes (e.g. delivering social services) as erecting a ‘wall of separation’, although this is impossible and also undesirable. However, in a time of cooperation, the government has to remain equidistant from all religions and respect the constitutional principles of freedom of religion and secularism. As discussed above, what the Ethiopian government did was neither cooperation nor equal support for all religious institutions. The government action was not equidistant but very close to some (Sufis-Ahabash) even at the exclusion of others (Salafis). It was also not cooperative in its true sense of government impartiality in the treatment of different religions in the country. The act not only damaged the credibility and legitimacy of the government in the eyes of different religious groups but also seriously undermined their constitutional rights. Obviously, acts of government of cooperating with certain religious groups supposed to be moderate at the exclusion of others would not fall in any of the spectrums of secularism to justify government measures. It is neither assertive secularism that advocates for the expulsion of all religious dogmas and practices from influencing public policies and actions nor passive secularism which advocates for government abstention from favouring or disfavouring a certain religion in any grounds. The active engagement of a government in promoting Sufism (Ahabash) certainly contradicts these two principles of secularism.

It is rather designed to create ‘governmental Islam’ tailored to fit the government’s desire for its ultimate goal of controlling power. By doing so, the government is trying to combat the involvement of ‘extremist Islamic groups’ in politics by creating its own

version of Islam through nationalisation of Ahabash. The ultimate goal is to change a certain religious dogma by supporting its favourites by making religion an instrument for securing public support. Despite all the efforts of the government to install its favourite 'apolitical and tolerant Islam' in Ethiopia, the fact that Ahabash was invited through Mejlis, which itself failed to win the hearts and minds of Ethiopian Muslims, undermined its success. Hence, I conclude that, State favouritism towards Ahabash as a 'counter-extremism strategy' in Ethiopia is a failure with its backlash effect on the government and Mejlis leadership. The protest, at least in the open, now ceased and the situation seems calm but many are still aggrieved with the decision of the government and the Mejlis leadership with a long-term damaging effect of Muslim support for the government and the peace and stability of the State.

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Leadership and Intellectual Humility in the Coptic Orthodox Church: Bishop Athanasius of Beni Suef (1962-2000) and the Papal Committee

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Abstract

This essay explores the concept of intellectual humility in the context of religious and communal leadership within the Coptic Orthodox Church, the indigenous Church of Egypt. The focus is on the strategies employed by Athanasius, the Bishop of Beni Suef and Bahnasa (1962- 2000) during a period of inner Coptic strife caused by the existence of the so-called Papal Committee (1981 to 1985). The root of the conflict was a head-on collision of ideas between the Coptic Pope, Shenouda III (1971-2012) and President Sadat (1970-1981) that resulted in the Pope being banned to a remote desert monastery. One of the main arguments in this essay is that the character trait called “intellectual humility” was foundational to Athanasius’ leadership style and instrumental in saving the Coptic Church from being torn apart by inner conflicts.

KEY WORDS: Coptic Orthodox Church, Bishop Athanasius, Pope Shenouda, Religious Leadership, Intellectual Humility

*“What makes me a bishop is helping the handicapped and the elderly.”
Anba Athanasius*

Introduction

In this essay I explore the concept of intellectual humility within the context of religious and communal leadership in the Coptic Orthodox Church, the indigenous Church of Egypt.²I am especially trying to understand what made the leadership style of Athanasius, the Bishop of Beni Suef and Bahnasa (1962 -2000) unique and effective, especially during a period of intense strife within the Church. He was among the Church’s most influential

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² In the rest of this article I will use the term Coptic Church when referring to the Coptic Orthodox Church, however, there also exists a Coptic Catholic Church and a Coptic Evangelical Church in Egypt.

and respected leaders yet until today remains largely unknown, even within Coptic circles. I am particularly interested in the manner in which he handled the internal conflicts within the Coptic Church during the time of the so-called Papal Committee (1981 to 1985) which is still a vivid part of Coptic memory. Athanasius chaired the contentious Committee for most of its existence. Yet, while the sheer existence of the Committee led to inner Coptic discord, it never exploded into a cycle of long-lasting public feuds between Bishop Athanasius and the Coptic Pope, Shenouda III (1971-2012). In fact, until the very end of his life, Athanasius managed to maintain cordial relationships between him, the Pope, and other individuals and groups who criticised him for his role in the Papal Committee.

When looking at Athanasius' leadership strategies, my guiding question is, "What were the specific characteristics and character traits that made this bishop stand out in comparison to his peers, especially in times of strife and adversity?" During his lifetime he was seen as nothing less than an exemplary Church leader and deeply admired for his piety, wisdom, and humility. However, so were his peers, the most famous of whom was his nemesis Pope, Shenouda III (1971-2012).

While religious leadership differ from other forms of leadership, for example from leadership models in the world of business and not-for-profit organisations (NGO's), there is much overlap. Nowadays, as the research about what makes an effective leader is exploding, we can apply multiple results from publications probing these questions from the vantage point of psychological, sociological, neuroscience and management research models to religious leadership issues. Building on the growing research about the character trait of humility, one of my main arguments is that the trait called "intellectual humility" was foundational to Athanasius' leadership style and saved the Coptic Church from being torn apart by inner conflicts during a period that started at the end of the 1970s and ended in 1985. Before I elaborate on this conflict, let me introduce the concept of intellectual humility; the lynchpin of this essay's argument.

Humility *Vis-À-Vis* Intellectual Humility

In psychological research, humility has been identified as a trait that involves (a) an accurate or moderate view of one's strengths and weaknesses as well as being, and (b) interpersonally other-oriented rather than self-focused, marked by the ability to restrain egotism in ways that maintain social acceptance.³ Egotism in this context refers to self-oriented emotions such as pride or shame.⁴

Being a Bishop, Athanasius was well-acquainted with the concept of humility. In the Coptic Church, Bishops are chosen from among the monks whose life centres on practising this virtue. Of course, Jesus serves as the prime example; among others, he washed the disciples' feet and freely relinquished his own station and dignity to be crucified. The Bible, the New as well as the Old Testament, is furthermore filled with exhortations that we should become like children and live in a spirit of humility. A central text is in the book of Luke: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."⁵ Humility is seen as the true antidote

³ Davis, D.E., Hook, J.N., etc. "Relational Humility:"225-234.

⁴ Stacey E. McElroy, etc. "Intellectual Humility:" 20.

⁵ Luke 14: 11 and 18:14, New Revised Standard Version. See: Mathew the Poor, *Communion*, ch. 5, "The Righteousness of Humility."

against arrogance or spiritual pride. It bursts the bubble of arrogance; “the counterfeit image of puffed-up thought.”⁶ Saint Benedict (480-547 CE), the founding father of Western monasticism, considered the virtue so central that he divided its practice into a twelve-step programme that served as a ladder for monks to reach the highest possible level of the monastic life.⁷

However acute awareness of the centrality of the virtue of humility, is not sufficient for the formation of effective leaders. They seem to have a specific form of humility that cannot be acquired just by years of practice but is an inborn trait. This form of humility has been identified as intellectual humility; it pertains to one’s knowledge or intellectual influence, understanding the limits of one’s knowledge, marked by openness to new ideas. It also involves regulating arrogance, as well as the ability to present one’s ideas in a non-offensive manner and receive contrary ideas without taking offence.

Intellectual humility is especially pertinent anytime there is a competition or negotiation of ideas in a relationship or group and allows one to leverage trust in order to form and strengthen relationships.⁸ It has been called the social oil that makes communities thrive and can prevent conflict in the same way as oil is important to keep the engine running and keeps it from overheating.⁹ Needless to say that intellectual humility seems an important virtue for religious leaders; while their influence over communities relies on their connection to the Divine, they are expected to model the messages they preach.

Coptic Church Reform

In order to understand the events discussed in this article, a brief introduction to some key moments in Coptic history is called for. The year 1918, when the Sunday School Movement was launched officially, is considered to be the starting point of what is now considered to be the revival of the Coptic Church. Pope Shenouda, Bishop Athanasius, and other influential leaders of their generation were all among the architects of the Sunday school programmes that eventually strengthened, reformed, and revived the Coptic Church.

Pope Kyrillos VI (1959-1971), who is considered to be one of the most influential and saintly popes of the Coptic modern era,¹⁰ selected the best and the brightest of these Sunday school leaders and placed them in key leadership positions. Shenouda and Athanasius were part of a group of highly educated “young rebels” that emerged during the 1950s and steered the Coptic Church into the 21st century.

Athanasius and Shenouda had met during the 1940s at Cairo University and both were spiritual sons of Pope Kyrillos VI and had been monks in the same monastery; the Monastery of the Syrians. When Kyrillos ordained them Bishop in 1962, he had handpicked each of them for their visionary ideas and strong leadership skills. Shenouda

⁶ Vivian, *Journeying*, p. 81.

⁷ Meisel & Mastro, *The Rule*, p. 56-61.

⁸ Stacey E. McElroy, etc. “Intellectual Humility,” 20.

⁹ Joshua N. Hook, etc. “Intellectual humility and forgiveness:” 499-506.

¹⁰ June 20, 2013, the Holy Synod of the Coptic Church canonised Pope Kyrillos VI and Habib Guirguis (d. 1951), both major figures in the revival of the Coptic Church. Middle East Institute Editor’s Blog, June 20, 2013.

became the Bishop of Christian Education while Athanasius was put in charge of the Bishopric of Beni Suef, a town surrounded by hundreds of villages some 110 miles south of Cairo.

A third influential Coptic leader and prominent actor in the Papal Committee who needs to be mentioned in this context is Bishop Samuel (1962-1981). He was ordained Bishop for Public, Ecumenical and Social Services in 1962. Among others, he has been credited with founding the Coptic Church outside Egypt which resulted in a rapidly growing number of Coptic communities in Europe, North America, Australia and numerous countries in Africa, Asia, and South America.¹¹ Samuel was shot by Islamic extremists on October 6, 1981, at the same time as President Sadat was murdered. He was sitting behind the President while watching a military parade.¹² Athanasius and Samuel were deeply intertwined where it concerned their vision for the Coptic Church. In their view, apart from its religious and spiritual duties, the Church should pay attention to social issues such as poverty, sickness, and the lack of education. As a result, they became pioneers of social services and developmental work in Egypt, not just for the Copts but for the entire nation.¹³

After Shenouda was elected Pope, some cracks started to appear in the cordial relations between him and the two Bishops. Shenouda had won when a blindfolded boy picked his name from a vase holding the names of the three candidates who had gained the most votes. However, Samuel had been the most popular of the three candidates, gathering far more votes than Shenouda to the point where some speculated that this popularity irked Shenouda.¹⁴ Initially the differences in their respective vision about the life of the Church did not greatly affect the cooperation between Athanasius, Samuel and the Pope. In fact, their strong personalities and opinions led to healthy disagreements and often the Pope would change his mind and yield to his peers. (Interview with Bishop Athanasius, Beni Suef, February 19, 1998).

¹¹ Of the 128 bishops of the Coptic Orthodox Holy Synod, 32 are in charge of immigration and missionary communities. For the entire list see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Synod_of_the_Coptic_Orthodox_Church.

¹² For the attack and an explanation what evolved see: “Assassination of Anwar El Sadat.” Accessed October 7, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhu-YgCyPz4>.

¹³ This essay is part of a larger project that aims at recapturing a recent period in Coptic history that is known to all Copts, yet has yielded few academic and non-academic writings. Especially where it concerns the work and lives of Samuel and Athanasius many particulars elude us. In fact, after his death, Samuel’s legacy was nearly erased from Coptic history. One of the reasons I focus on Bishop Athanasius is that I had known him since 1986 and witnessed several moments in his career where he applied the approach that has now been identified as intellectually humble. When writing my dissertation on the Coptic nuns I frequently visited the nunnery he had founded and met and spoke with him numerous times. Within the Coptic context his cordial reception of a non-Coptic (at the time) unmarried woman was remarkable. Following Egyptian cultural mores, few of the other bishops would spend time with me alone or be engaged in a frank exchange of ideas and opinions. As I realised later, Athanasius seemed completely oblivious to gender, status or ethnicity. He just accepted me and everybody else for who we were. Over the years we kept in touch, and towards the end of his life he granted me several interviews in which he talked about his vision, not only for Egypt and the Coptic Church, but for humanity. It was during those meetings that we discussed the issue of the Papal Committee. For my book on the nuns, see: van Doorn-Harder, Pieternella, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*.

¹⁴ For a full description of the procedure to elect a Coptic pope see: Saad, Riegels & Westbrook, “Traditions.”

Church and Politics

Kyrillos' reign coincided with that of President Gamal Abdal Nasser (1954-1970) whose socialist reform agenda had led to the confiscation of farmlands that had hit the Copts particularly hard as many had been land owners. Another policy of Nasser that directly affected the Copts was his pan-Arab ideology that understood Arab nations to be unified by the Arabic language and Islamic history. As a result, public school curricula became Arabised and infused with the study of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood started to work their way through society and awaken a renewed sense of religiosity in the Muslim population with as a side effect the emergence of radical groups. Throughout the 1960s, religio-political tensions grew and strife between the Copts and the Muslims increased.

When Anwar al-Sadat became the President in 1970, he tried to consolidate his constituencies; among others, by courting Islamist groups. Islam became Sadat's tool for political mobilisation with as a result that during the late 1970s Islamist influence on society increased. Mass media and mosque pulpits became filled with radical voices promoting intolerance of non-Muslims, and peddling conspiracy theories about the Copts who were accused of plotting to destroy Egypt. As a result, sectarian clashes between Muslims and Christians accelerated exponentially.¹⁵

Sadat tried to stem the tide of rising violence by introducing several regulations that were disadvantageous to the Copts. Since the actions of militant Muslim groups against the Copts were often tacitly condoned by the President, Pope Shenouda's protests became increasingly outspoken. He confronted Sadat openly, accusing the President of failing to protect Egypt's Christian population. At times he also refused to cooperate with the President's political agenda which aggravated the President.

May 1980, in a final attempt to appease militant Muslim groups, Sadat convinced the government to accept a constitutional amendment which made the principles of sharia, or Islamic law, the basic source of legislation rather than one of several sources of law. This move *de facto* meant that Egypt became a state ruled by Islamic law in which Christians were reduced to the status of *dhimmi*; secondary citizens. This status had been abolished since 1856. In an address to Parliament that month, the President insulted Shenouda by stating that, "the Pope must understand that I am the Muslim President of a Muslim country."¹⁶ The escalating situation put Shenouda even more on the defence with moderate Bishops urging the Pope to tone down his rhetoric.¹⁷

The Papal Committee (1981-1985)

The fifth of September, 1981, in the midst of severe political and religious tensions, the conflict between Sadat and Shenouda exploded. As a result, cordial relationships also

¹⁵ About this period in Egyptian history, see among others, Ansari, "Sectarian Conflict," Fawzi. *Al-Baba Shanuda*, 123-128. S.S.Hasan. *Christians versus Muslims*, 108-113, and Heikal, *Autumn of Fury*, 220-221.

¹⁶ Farah. *Religious Strife*, 10-13.

¹⁷ Copts consider to be among Sadat's most grievous policies the introduction of the Islamic penal code for apostasy. This code affected the Copts since it made it punishable by death if a Copt who had converted to Islam wished to return to their original faith. Guirguis and van Doorn-Harder, *The Emergence*, 162.

broke down between Shenouda and Athanasius. Sadat detained 1,536 of his opponents and placed the Pope under house arrest in the Monastery of St. Bishoy where he ended up staying for 1,213 days. Sadat wanted to dethrone the Pope and replace him with a candidate of his own choice. Numerous Coptic prelates, among whom Athanasius, Samuel, and Father Matta al-Miskin, the famous abbot of the St. Macarius Monastery, hurried to the presidential palace to convince the President that this move was unprecedented in Egyptian history and forbidden by the Church's Canon Law: the Coptic Pope was elected for life. They convinced the President that not one of the senior clergy would be prepared to replace their Pope. After much deliberation, Sadat allowed a compromise and formed an interim committee (1981-1985) that would take on the Pope's responsibilities.¹⁸ Shenouda rejected the Committee and its sheer existence led to an outright war between the Pope and its five members; two of whom were Samuel and Athanasius.

After sending the Pope into exile, Sadat ordered the Bishops who had disagreed with Shenouda's approach to take a seat in the Papal Committee. He appointed Samuel as Chair, a position filled by Athanasius after Samuel was killed. The Committee's history is complicated and many of the details have gone to the grave with its members. The willingness of the five Bishops to serve was motivated by their fear that the tensions between the Church and the government might generate an Islamist backlash. The committee members never questioned the reality that Shenouda was their Pope. And during what Copts call the period of the "infamous forty months," they commuted between Cairo and the monastery to discuss policies with the Pope. To keep the Pope abreast of Church matters, much of their time was consumed by travelling on dusty roads and applying for permits to visit their leader who, after all, in the view of government officials was a prisoner.

The Pope's banishment infuriated many Copts and especially the communities outside Egypt hurled bitter accusations at the committee members.¹⁹ Until very recently some considered Bishop Samuel's death as a form of divine retribution for having had the audacity to attend the ceremony. Under normal circumstances the Pope should have been there and attending in his place was seen as an act of treason.

Hosni Mubarak succeeded Sadat and relations between the Pope and the government improved. January 1985 Shenouda was set free and allowed to celebrate the Christmas mass in the Coptic cathedral on January 6. The committee was disbanded and the Bishops returned to their usual tasks but not without consequences. They had become *personae non gratae*, including Father Matta al-Miskin who had been instrumental in the formation of the committee. His books were banned from papal libraries and bookstores and a feud of the pen unfolded between the Pope and Matta al-Miskin that ended with al-Miskin's death on June 8, 2006. The legacy of Bishop Samuel was virtually erased. The Pope ordered the deacon in charge of Samuel's personal and clerical files to hand them all over. They subsequently disappeared. It was not until the year 2015 that a group called The Friends of Anba Samuel discovered that a deacon had made copies. Bishop Athanasius endured several years of private and public humiliation; a topic that I will return to shortly.

¹⁸ The common opinion is that it was Father Matta al-Miskin, the abbot of the St. Macarius Monastery who convinced Sadat to put a committee in place. Rumour has it that the President wanted Matta al-Miskin to replace Shenouda. See some of the posthumous memoirs of Matta el-Miskin: *Abuna al-qummu Matta al-Miskin*, 57, 58.

¹⁹ See: Watson, *Among the Copts*, 72-92 & Reiss, Wolfram. *Erneuerung*, 304-306.

Bishop Athanasius (1923-2000)

In order to understand Athanasius' mindset and vision on life we need to consider some moments in his biography that influenced his career as a Church leader, including the long time before he was ordained a Bishop. In fact, in my view where he grew up and how he spent his youth greatly influenced his actions as an adult, especially when it came to practising forms of intellectual humility.

A Village Childhood

Bishop Athanasius was born in 1923 in the provincial town of El-Mahalla al-Kubra, seventy-five miles north of Cairo.²⁰ The town was famous for its textile industry. The opening of a large cotton cloth mill in 1927 had triggered a local industrial revolution as the new method of weaving superseded the domestic handloom. Situated in the fertile Nile delta, the town was also an agricultural centre. The Bishop grew up on his parents' farm in a village on the edge of town. They lived off the produce from their vegetable garden along with the milk and meat from a few cows, goats, sheep, and eggs from their chickens. Their main source of income was a twenty-acre plot where they grew cotton for the textile mills. His childhood was a happy one, and during the rare moments he could steal for a chat and a cup of coffee, the Bishop fondly remembered his parents, siblings and the house he grew up in. It had two floors with a pantry on the ground floor where vats of dried fava beans were stored. Mashed fava beans have been a staple Egyptian food for as long as people can remember; according to a saying, "Beans even satisfied the Pharaohs." They are cheap and nutritious and, when stored properly, last a long time. As a child, one of the Bishop's chores had been to help store them. Climbing into the large vat, the children had to put all their weight on the beans and press them down until they were airtight, and bugs could find no spaces to feast. The beans taught him that small actions can have big consequences; a family could starve if their dried goods became unfit for human consumption.

His parents often hosted guests; Christian as well as Muslim. Most of the children in the neighbourhood, and most of his friends were Muslim. They stayed for dinner and regularly spent the night. The house was often filled with guests; uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, and travellers who stopped by for rest and food. In good times and in bad times, there was always enough. Sometimes the harvests failed, and servings were smaller, but nobody left hungry. Throughout his career the Bishop was as popular among the Muslims in his Diocese as he was among the Christians. While close to some of Egypt's most volatile areas that were rife with interreligious strife, Beni Suef on the whole remained quiet during his time in office.

Athanasius' parents were deeply religious and never distinguished between Christians and Muslims; they never judged people but accepted them for who they were. While respecting those in power and higher offices, at home they did not care for strict hierarchies based on wealth or public office. Most of all, sharing with anyone less fortunate was essential to practising their faith. From everything they harvested, picked, or found, his father would take one tenth and distribute it among the needy. The family motto was that whatever was left should be enough; if food was bountiful, they all ate well, if it was scarce, they all economised. His parental home not only instilled in the

²⁰ The information about his childhood quoted here was given to me by the Bishop during an interview in Cairo, on February 10, 1998.

Bishop empathy for the poor and those of other religions, it also brought home that one should never be afraid to share. While many saw it as taking away from what they had, in the Bishop's home it was considered to increase life's priceless qualities.

The Bishop was a smart kid. A photograph taken when he was around eight years-old shows his trademark inquisitive and penetrating look that never took any tall tale for granted. "He can look right through you," Many Copts used to tell me. "He is more than psychic; he has supernatural vision." He denied it. "I just watch, observe, and listen," he used to say. "In the noise we Egyptians make, much information is lost, and only when still can we hear and see what is really going on." His watching, observing, and listening made him refuse to waste time on useless activities, even as a child in school.

In the year he was born, 1923, Egypt had gained a measure of independence from Great Britain. As a first step to strengthening the nation, the new government launched an ambitious educational programme that provided free primary education for all children. In villages, these schools were meant to replace the traditional elementary schools called *kuttabs*, where Muslims were taught reading and writing by memorising the Qur'an, while Christian children learned part of the Gospels and the Psalms by heart. The school had one teacher, who often left the actual instruction to an advanced student. The Bishop's parents sent him to the *kuttab* where he sat among children who were running and screaming. If and when they were quiet, they memorised the Bible. Young as he was, he realised it was doing him no good and begged his parents: "Take me out of that mad house; I can study the book by myself." His parents enrolled him in one of the new schools in town, where he gained enough knowledge to continue high school and be accepted at Cairo University. At the age of seventeen, he moved to Cairo, joining the swelling numbers of Egyptian youth moving from the countryside to the big city.

Bishop Athanasius came from Coptic royalty; his family was packed with priests, monks and bishops. One of his uncles had even been the Pope (Macarius III) from 1944-45 for the brief period of eighteen months. He had been old when elected and his reign was too short to be memorable. But Athanasius remembered sitting on his knee and listening to the many stories he told about living in a monastery. At the age of seventeen, in 1940, he had decided he would become a monk.

Farmer, Father, and Garbage Collector

This rural background was foundational to what the Bishop called his "two main identities:" that of farmer and garbage collector. I would like to add a third one: that of a father. In my analysis, all of his activities; including that of leader, community worker, scholar and educator, can be translated back to these "identities."

The Farmer

Bishop Athanasius always remained a farmer; he had a keen eye for practical details and great respect for manual work. In fact, he respected all he worked with, whatever their position. In his own way he was also an environmental activist. His understanding for the plight of those working the land became the moving force behind the developmental

and agricultural projects within his Diocese.²¹ He himself did not shy away from manual work; many testify of witnessing him at the crack of dawn cleaning bathrooms while at youth camp or in the student dorms. According to him, “Cleaning the bathroom is a better job than giving speeches; it makes people feel comfortable.” (Interview Gamal Zekrie, Cairo, 3-13-2015)

The habit of sharing meals and doing things together stayed with the Bishop his entire life and considerably influenced his management approach. When launching new projects he stressed the importance of teamwork. Considering all to be on the same level, and using for Egypt’s hierarchical society unusual formats of, for example, open discussions and group study sessions, he encouraged all to speak their minds and form their own opinions.²² Furthermore, respect for men and women of all ages and backgrounds allowed him to take advice from the sisters who were running the various projects in his Diocese. He saw criticism as a blessing. (Interview Sister Rauth, Cairo, March 4-2015)

The community of the Sisters of St. Mary started March 19, 1965.²³ The sisters helped the Bishop execute many of this developmental, social, educational and health projects. From the beginning, the Bishop consulted with them about the types of vocation they wished to pursue. When in 1975, the famous Soeur Emmanuel contacted the community to ask for their help, they were only five fully consecrated sisters.²⁴ To pursue her passion in caring for the garbage collectors at the Ezbet en-Nakhlarea in north Cairo, Soeur Emmanuelle needed an Egyptian partner. The sisters and the Bishop discussed the proposal at great length and decided to take on the work. It meant that one of them, Sister Sarah, would move to Cairo and live outside the community more or less permanently. While the hierarchy of clergy, age, and gender, would have allowed the Bishop to have the last word, he left the final decision up to her.²⁵

This basic attitude of encouraging individuals to discern their own talents and vocation also had the unexpected result of creating new forms of hierarchy within the Church since the Bishop selected people for certain offices based on their capacities and not based on age, rank or education. The Bishop’s concern to create strong, committed leaders with an independent mind translated in numerous new priests, deacons and other servants trained in his Diocese who went on to serve the larger Church, in Egypt as well as in the lands of immigration.

Furthermore, Bishop Athanasius understood the importance of education; especially for the very young and for those left behind by circumstances. During the days he served as a Sunday school teacher, supervising the Sunday school of Faggala in Cairo (1947-1958), he preferred to take the pre-school level classes. Nobody else wanted that age group since it was not considered to be prestigious. He, however, saw the immense potential hidden in the minds of those five-year-children. In later years, while Coptic convents decided to accept candidates with university degrees only, he mandated that the Sisters of St. Mary received illiterate women as well. As part of their novitiate they learned to read and write.

²¹ For an overview of the various social and developmental activities initiated by Bishop Athanasius see: Diocese of Beni Souef, *Participation in Ministry*.

²²Salama. *Shakhsyat*, 14.

²³ For more information about the nuns, see: Van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*.

²⁴ For the entire story see: Soeur Sara, *Emmanuelle*, 45-49.

²⁵ Soeur Sara, *Emmanuelle*, 48.

The Garbage Collector

“Bishop Athanasius had no sense of boundaries (*hudud*),” many of those who worked with him told me. By this they meant that he did not differentiate among people and took them for who and what they were. He used to say: “I never met anybody I did not love.”²⁶ In his eyes everybody came carrying, “a recommendation from Jesus.” The Bishop’s motto was: “We are all part of Christ’s body; I am the hand, you are the finger, and she is the arm.” The sick and the weak were “the parts that are hurting in the body of Christ.” Working with the mentally and physically handicapped as well as with the elderly confirmed him in this idea and once occasioned him say that what made him a Bishop was, “helping the handicapped and the old people.” To him washing the bodies of the elderly equalled “standing in front of the altar,” and carrying their potties in the morning was the same as “carrying the incense during mass.” (Interview Sister Rauth, Cairo, March 4-2015).

The life of Jesus Christ inspired the Bishop’s idea to self-identify as a “garbage collector.” Jesus had come to collect all human sins and became poor in order to be able to serve all. This attitude marked all Athanasius’ actions as a religious and spiritual leader. He refused to wear fancy robes and when a wealthy Copt in Beni Suef chided him for opening the doors of the bishopric every night, he answered, “I am not the director of a big company, I am a father and must take care of my children at all times.” (Interview Bishop Musa, March 13-2015)

The Father

One aspect of the Bishop’s life that is little known is that 1947-1958 he served as a father to his sister’s children. When his brother-in-law died unexpectedly, Athanasius postponed his dream to enter the monastery in order to provide for the widow and the young children. In my view, this blow of fate would help him gain a deep understanding of the hardships and pitfalls of raising a family in an economy devastated by the Second World War.

Never would he underestimate the plight of parents living from paycheck to paycheck. Raising a niece, Lily, who later on became a medical doctor, also gave him keen insights in the various forms of discrimination against women. In high school, Lily wanted to study the science track, but the headmistress refused to allow her into that programme since, “that was not appropriate for girls.” (Interview Dr. Lily, Cairo, March 12, 2015) When questioning the decision, Lily was disciplined for being “rude” and “impolite.” Still being an unassuming young man, Athanasius’ powers of persuasion must have been considerable since the school gave in and allowed Lily to take the science classes. Without this preparation she would not have been able to study medicine and become a successful medical specialist.

Bishop Athanasius himself traced all his identities back to his vocation as an educator. Having taught at Sunday schools as well as high schools, he understood that teaching was not just by the word but also by example. What set him apart from many of his colleagues was that he practised what he taught.

²⁶ Salama. *Shakhsiyat* mentions the same point: “I do not remember having detested anyone in my entire life. Neither did I love one person more than the other,” 31.

Practising Intellectual Humility

Thus far I have introduced an exceptional man who was highly intelligent, had a keen eye for detail, and used a practical and hands on approach to all types of work. His personality stood out for its tolerance of those who were different, his compassion for the poor and those suffering, and his simplicity. Most of all, the people who remember him mention his humility that was experienced as deeply authentic. So far, to prove my point, I have given various examples, several of them gathered during a research trip in March 2015, in combination with my own interactions with Bishop Athanasius.

Researchers of leadership would have a field day with such a personality since in many ways his attitude seems to defy the norms of what makes a strong, authoritative leader for whom humility would be an undesirable trait. Yet, the Bishop was not a pushover; his voice was taken seriously, not only by his parishioners but also, for example, by the Governor of Beni Suef who often sought his advice. The virtue of intellectual humility seems to be key to his success as a leader.

One of the burning questions in the research on work-related issues has been how leaders positively influence the people working for them. An important finding is that leaders who have a unique combination of drive and humility create an atmosphere within their company that encourages people to freely exchange ideas, create strong bonds, work together and are willing to sacrifice for each other.²⁷ Within the constraints of Egyptian and Coptic expectations concerning hierarchy, status and gender, the Bishop introduced working methods that allowed all, from the lowest to the highest rank to have a voice. Even the participants in his programmes for the mentally retarded were asked to pitch in.

While it is an important virtue, researchers of behavioural studies found that when facing certain situations, even intellectual humility can be difficult to practice or maintain. The most prevalent of such situations have been identified as when communities or individuals negotiate ideas that are linked to forms of identity, experience negative moral emotions such as disgust, when there is an imbalance of power in relationships in which a leader holds influence over ideas and their exchange, or in case of disagreements when both parties are emotionally invested in the outcome. The Papal Committee certainly served as one such situation, yet the Bishop managed to avoid frontal collisions with those who were against it. He never spoke ill of those criticising him and insisted on respecting the clerical hierarchy that put Shenouda above him.

After Shenouda's return of Cairo, Athanasius faced the challenge of setting the right tone for future engagement. They met in public for the first time on Easter Monday, April 1985 during a visit to the Monastery of the Syrians. The story of this meeting as told by an eyewitness goes as follows:

Easter Monday, April 1985, a Coptic couple now living in Illinois but originally from Beni Suef visited the Monastery of the Syrians accompanied by Bishop Athanasius. The occasion was the feast on the day after Easter, Sham en-Nessim. They came to greet Pope Shenouda who customary celebrated this day at the monastery where he used to be a monk. As they came in, they found Pope Shenouda sitting in the courtyard of the monastery, surrounded by a crowd of visitors. They had a picnic together, eating traditional dishes such as *fessikh*, salted

²⁷McElroy, etc. McElroy, etc. "Intellectual Humility,"21.

fish, and green onions to celebrate the day. The celebration that year was momentous since President Mubarak had lifted the decree on the Pope's detainment in January. For Bishop Athanasius it was the first time he met the Pope in public.

According to the couple, Athanasius called HH Pope Shenouda from the top of his lungs saying, '*Anba Shenouda, sayyidna, akhteet hallelni.*' [Our Master Pope Shenouda, I sinned, forgive me.] He walked quickly towards the Pope and prostrated himself in front of him until his forehead touched the ground. Pope Shenouda pulled him up and they embraced each other and both burst out in tears while the mass of visitors looked on, dumbfounded and in utter astonishment."²⁸

This public act of contrition was a brilliant move to deflate any possible anger or animosity from the side of the Pope. Other Committee members were not so lucky. Samuel could not rehabilitate himself and, according to researcher S.S. Hasan, was the person Shenouda "hated more than anyone else in the world."²⁹ His legacy was erased from Coptic memory. Relations between the Pope and Athanasius became cordial enough for the Bishop to remain one of the most respected members of the Holy Synod and be assigned prestigious duties such as representing the Coptic Church at the World Council of Churches.

When asked about the time in the Committee, Athanasius never spoke ill of Shenouda. Instead, he acknowledged that he knew his position as Committee Chair would incite hatred and blame but insisted that his personal experience should not matter:

Suppose that history would say that there had been a crisis in the Church and a man called Athanasius had acted as a traitor. Even then the main fact would remain that the Church survived the crisis. Never mind the person. (Interview Cairo, February 19, 1998).

After Shenouda passed away in March 2012, his successor Tawadros II initiated a process of rehabilitation for those who had been pushed away from the Coptic stage during the time of his predecessor. October 6, 2016, during a speech commemorating his death, Samuel's voice could finally be heard and Copts learned that he and Athanasius had been of the same mind about their role in the Committee and relationship with the Egyptian government. The evening before the parade, Coptic leaders had asked Samuel if attending was the right thing to do. To him it was, since, "the welfare of the Church has priority over all else."³⁰ The speaker, Pachomius, currently one of the oldest and highly esteemed Coptic Bishops, referred to the murder as Samuel's "martyrdom," elevating him to the level of martyr; the highest possible rank in Coptic spiritual hierarchy.

²⁸ Waziz@coptsdigest.com, message from William Hanna, St. Louis Missouri, sent Tu. Dec. 5, 2000.

²⁹ Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims*, p. 97, 184.

³⁰ Al Anba Pachomius, October 6, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atr-OimgwUU&feature=youtu.be>

Conclusion

The Papal Committee unleashed situations where even the most peaceful person could have reacted negatively; situations that could have led to conflicts due to identity (gender, hierarchy, for example), or disgust (when dealing with people who act in ways that would make others angry or aggravated). Yet the many oral testimonies of people working closely with Bishop Athanasius testify of an insistence on following a path of humility under all circumstances, even at the detriment of his own status and reputation. In my view this attitude was not just rooted in personality or position, but also in his childhood experiences. However, he never considered his actions and attitude to be extraordinary or different from what could and should be the norm. Many called him “saintly.” From psychological research geared towards the corporate world we now learn that we can classify his behaviour as “intellectually humble.” In fact, it is the type of behaviour that allows for the good life; for a balanced society where the wellbeing of the individual supersedes the personal condition and translates into wellbeing for all.

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The Unexplored Assets: Religious Approach for Peace Making Among the Siltie People in Southern Ethiopia

Kairedin Tezera¹

Abstract

This article explores the roles that faith-based dispute settlement institutions play for peace making among the Siltie in southern Ethiopia. It looks into the intertwined and multifaceted roles of faith leaders as peace makers, religious figures as well as social actors. The article argues that the inefficiency of the state and *Sharia* courts worsened by an acute shortage of staff seems to render the courts irrelevant in the eyes of many local people, who often question their legitimacy and jurisdiction. It also argues that elders and local religious actors who are conversant with grass-root level conflicts are more important figures to end face to face disputes and foster efforts to promote reconciliation than state judges and *Qadis*. This is evidenced by the seemingly higher number of people who prefer taking their cases to faith-based and customary modes of dispute settlement rather than the *Sharia* and state courts. This indicates the existence of internal power contentions between plural intra-faith dispute settlement institutions on the one hand, and the state courts on the other. I have mainly employed a qualitative data gathering method to generate the data presented in this article.

KEY WORDS: Islamic Pluralism, Grass-roots Justice, Salafi, Sufi Shrine, *Sharia* Law, *Qadi*, *Berche*

Introduction

The Siltie's legal landscape consists of at least three normative systems. Namely: the state; the customary and the religious legal systems. The religious legal system comprises of: *Sharia* courts, courts of local Mashayik/Waliyes², courts of internationally and nationally renowned Sheiks such as Abdul Qadir Jailani and Sheik Hussein of Bale.³ It was also noted that followers of Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church resort to Siltie customary

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² *Wali* or Meshayik refers to a human religious figure, dead or alive, popularly recognized as honorable Islamic symbols by the majority Muslims. It is usually represented by a tomb, and in some cases by a mosque, and is associated with a shrine.

³ Zerihun, "Wali Venerating Practices, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism among the Siltie," in Muslim Ethiopia, ed. Patrick Desplat and Terje Østebø. (Norges arktiske universitet, 2013). 146.

courts and the faith-based dispute settlement institutions to settle tensions among themselves and with the predominantly Muslim Siltie.

In addition, Islam and the Siltie have strong interactions, not only has religion played an important role for the identity-construction of the people⁴, but more importantly for dispute settlements as well. The role faith plays is not only witnessed in the area of dispute settlement, it is also a pivotal social control mechanism to regulate the social and moral aberrations among the Siltie and its neighbours. The *Sharia* courts which have been in place at least since the 1950s also play a paramount role as faith-based dispute settlement institutions. Nevertheless, some young Muslims accuse the *Qadis* of being acquiescent to the state agenda. My findings indicate that despite the fact that the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia constitution (henceforth, FDRE) recognises both customary and religious institutions of dispute settlement⁵, the *Sharia* courts could not deliver justice due to a number of internal and external factors.⁶ With these problems at hand, another form of dispute settlement forums like the Sufi Shrines and, the Social Committee have been developed since the 1990s. The local community resorts to these centres for faith-healing and reconciliation, not only among themselves but also with Allah, since they consider the Sheiks as mediators to the Divine.⁷ This clearly indicates the existence not only of Islamic legal pluralism but also a number of plural legal systems among the Siltie.

The Geo-Political Setting

Siltie zone is located in Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Regional State (SNNPRS) in Ethiopia. The Siltie people mainly live in the Siltie zone⁸, while quite a large number of the people are also found in various urban centres in the country. The Siltie zone was formed in April 2001 following a referendum that separated Siltie from *Gurage*, *Hadiyya*, and *Halaba* peoples⁹. Based on the 2007 national population census, the total population of the Siltie is estimated to be more than a million in 2015/16¹⁰. Agriculture is the mainstay of the local economy. The religious composition of the area is Muslims 97.6% and 2.03% are of various denominations of Christianity.¹¹ Even if there has been some erosion of traditional cultural norms and practices due to the influence of reformist strains of Islam imported from the Gulf region over the last 25 years, the Siltie have maintained their customs, local beliefs, and values including the faith-based and customary modes of dispute settlement.

⁴ Markakis, John, *The Politics of Identity: The Case of The Gurage*, (Uppsala, Nordiska African Institute, 1998).130-3.

⁵ Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution (Addis Ababa, 1995), Art.34,78/5/.

⁶ Mohammed Abdo." *Legal Pluralism, Sharia Courts, and Constitutional Issues in Ethiopia*,"(Institute of Federalism and Legal Studies, ECSC, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (2010).

⁷ Dinberu et al, *Gogot: History, Culture and Language* (Welkite, 1995), Kairedin Tezera, *Serra. History, Culture*, 886-1993, (Addis Ababa,2012), Zerihun ,Wali,

⁸ Zone is the second administrative division after Regional State in the contemporary federal structure of Ethiopia.

⁹ Zerihun, "Contested Popular Islamic Practices among Ethiopian Muslims: The Case of *Warrie* among the Siltie," *Journal on Moving Communities* 7, no. 1 (2007): 73–94.

¹⁰ Central Statistical Authority, *the 2007 Population Census of Ethiopia*, (Addis Ababa, 2008).

¹¹ Kairedin, Serra; Zerihun, Wali, 141; Siltie zone Finance Abstract (Werabe, 2015).

Conceptual Frameworks: An Overview

Although it is difficult to find a universal definition of religion, various scholarly discussions on the notion of religion can be subsumed under two major approaches. These are 'Substantive' and 'Functional' approaches. The 'substantive' approach looks at the content of religion such as key scriptures, theologies, bodies of doctrine, and values and beliefs enshrined in them, while the 'functional' approach underscores what religion 'does' to people such as providing them with sources of identity, morality, law and order, or by linking them together into communities¹². Geertz, for instance, has defined religion as a system of symbols that acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivation in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the mood and motivation seem uniquely realistic.¹³ Émile Durkheim defined it as a "unified system of beliefs and practices that pertain to sacred things and which unite adherents of the system into one single moral community."¹⁴ Galtung also defines religion as a path of ultimate transformation, comprised of interconnected systems of symbols and guidelines. These shape the individual and group subconscious from which social practices and interactions are all given meaning.¹⁵ Appleby, on the other hand, defines religion as an "integral culture, capable of forming personal and social identity and influencing subsequent experience and behaviour in profound ways." He further notes that religious peace building emerges as a new form of conflict transformation.¹⁶ Religion as a "cultural system" also underpins the very fabric of group and individual identity, providing the shared normative foundation that makes harmonious social interaction possible as well as meaningful.¹⁷

Moreover, religion is also depicted as a normative institution that commands the worshipper, not to be involved in murder, theft and deviant behaviour.¹⁸ It can also play a significant role, if used constructively, to resolve disputes. If actors employ it constructively, religion can affect individual and social responses to triggering events through - (a) placing the event in a historical, goal-seeking context, (b) providing meaning for events in light of values, goals, and religious identity and (c) offering rules for dealing with conflict through appropriate, affirmative responses based on religious precepts and idealised models or precedents.¹⁹

However, even if most modern constitutions including the 1995 FDRE constitution inculcate articles that promulgate the separation of state and religion and introduce secularism, 'billions of people structure their daily routines around the spiritual practices enjoined by a religious tradition, and they often do so quite publicly.'²⁰ Scholars also

¹² Morris, Religion and Anthropology: *A Critical Introduction*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1, The British Academy, The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace building, (London, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, 2015), 7-9.

¹³ Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

¹⁴ Durkheim, Émile, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, (New York: Free Press, 1995 [1915]), 47.

¹⁵ Galtung, Johan. "Conflict Life Cycles in Occident and Orient", in *Cultural Variation in Conflict Resolution*, ed D. P. Fry, and K. Bjorkqvist, (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997).

¹⁶ Appleby, R. Scott, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 2008), 6-8.

¹⁷ Geertz, Interpretation, 90; Said, Abdulaziz and Funk, Nathan C, "The Role of Faith in Cross-Cultural Conflict Resolution", (The European Parliament for the European Centre for Common Ground, 2001), 3.

¹⁸ Uche, *Religion and violent conflicts in Africa*. In *Nigerian democracy* (Awka, 2007). 390.

¹⁹ Seid and Funk, *The Role of Faith*, 4.

²⁰ Appleby. *The Ambivalence*. 3.

indicate that religion in many cultures remains largely unaffected by the public-private distinction.²¹ Religion draws its strength from its potency to induce or bring about change in the attitudes of its adherents, either positively or negatively.²² The above definitions briefly explain that religion has a central place in a society and can play a constructive role in maintaining the social order of a given society. Nevertheless, religions can also be employed for waging war. There are instances whereby wars were and are waged in the name of religion.

Studies show that religion has been used as a pretext to wage war and in the name of one or another groups.²³ The empirical data indicates that religion also play a significant role in peace building in various ways. Sheik Alkesiye's²⁴ role to forge an alliance between Muslims and Christians against the Italian's strategy of divide and rule in the 1930s, for instance, is widely cited among the Siltie to show how religion can play a positive role for peace building not only in intra-faith interactions but also in the interfaith contexts as well.

Faith-Based Institutions and Dispute Settlement

As dispute settlement entails not only the material interests of disputants, but also the restoration of relationships and reintegration. Faith plays a pivotal role in achieving these goals via interconnecting disputants under one identity as well as promising them a reward of eternal peace in the hereafter apart from internal and external peace they can get in the social world. Moreover, actors also admonish disputants if they reject the peace proposal not only from divine punishment but also in the failure they will meet in the social world. Religious actors have also a social role, a particular relationship to conflicted society that affects their perspective, credibility with other parties and overall effectiveness. Perceptions of religious actors' self-image and affiliation are also crucial for forum shopping.²⁵ Religious actors have a strong ground in faith as an embodiment of religious teaching. Thus, they can become important catalysts for change. In this regard, faith leaders play a crucial role in dispute settlements among the Siltie. They employ reciprocity and social action, such as boycotting as the main strategy in settling disputes between contending groups. Religious precepts and local beliefs are also crucial factors to narrow ruptures between disputants. *Jannab* (divine reward in the hereafter), as well as *Baraka* (blessings), are factors that help mediators reconcile disputants. *Ye Gudda Tree*²⁶ as a symbol of reconciliation is also a pivotal social control mechanism which helps disputants sustain their promise and ending feuds. According to this belief, breaking the

²¹ Appleby. *The Ambivalence*, 4. Tamanaha, Brian. *Understanding Legal Pluralism: Past to Present, Local to Global*, (University of Sydney, 2008), 398.

²² A. Casmir et al, "Religion, Violence, Poverty, and Underdevelopment in West Africa: Issues and Challenges of Boko Haram," in: *Open Journal of Philosophy*. Vol.4, No.1, (2014), 60.

²³ Appleby, *The Ambivalence*, 8.

²⁴ Sheikh Alkesiye is one of the widely celebrated Siltie sheiks whose mosque is visited monthly and annually not only by Siltie, but also neighboring Gurage, Halaba, Mareqo, and Oromo people during monthly Thursday Liqa and annual Alkeso Mawlid. He is mentioned as Waliye who contributed to the expansion of Islam in the area on the one hand and dispute settlement during the 1930s on the other.

²⁵ Borszik, Anne-Kristin. *Dispute Settlement in Eastern Guinea-Bissau: Self-Presentations, Stories and Agency*, (BIGSAS, Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2013), 26-27.

²⁶ It is a symbolic tree whereby disputants go and bury the *White thread* (in which both disputants under the auspices of the neutral jury tie each other with white thread to show they are now socially tied and end disputes that usher in a new era of peace) as a testimony of burying the hitherto enmity. They also believe that anyone who violates the *Gudda* will come and tell the tree to retaliate the one who breaks the oath.

vow will be punished with calamity on the perpetrator. Faith can play a significant role in dispute settlement since it employs various values and precepts which prioritise peace over violence, forgiveness over retaliation and incline to harmonious relationships to prevail not only among human beings horizontally but also between human beings and the Divine vertically.

According to the Siltie's interpretation, dispute (*zenna*) is two-dimensional: Horizontal dispute among human beings and vertical dispute between human beings and Allah. This idea has emanated from the religious worldview of the people. The religious cosmology of a group in privileging some values and ideals over others specifies how restoration, wholeness, and healing can be achieved through distinctive paths of a resolution adopted by different cultures.²⁷ In this vein, the Siltie's faith incorporates both worlds and hence success and failure here and in the hereafter are directly associated with the presence of *hiɁd* (quarrel) or not. It also privileges peace over a dispute as a source of blessing. The Siltie thus emphasise the idea of a quarrel as a cause of losing blessings and prosperity, as they put it: *hiɁd boɁine, bereka yatefan* (i.e. disagreement/quarrels cause loss of blessing in one's life), starting from family life to business and the hereafter. According to this belief, anyone who opens the door for reconciliation receives more blessings rather than the one who refuses to do so. This point is also one of the strategies conflict mediators employ to restore relationships and the *status quo* among disputants.

Therefore, someone may lose or be deprived of blessings in their life if s/he is in conflict either with human beings or the divine. The ruptures experienced in conflict situations often require symbolic or other social exchanges found within collective cosmologies. *Bereka/Blessing* and peace as well as becoming productive are associated with resolving disputes either through the involvement of conflict mediators or forgiveness, while failures in resolving *hiɁd* and rejecting reconciliation are tied up with non-productive or failure in this as well as the other world. In this way, conflict resolution strategies manifest distinctive conceptions of peace, which illuminate the terms and conditions necessary for social harmony to be both understood and experienced. As I observed in the field, religious actors mention various success and failure stories to their court attendants on the basis of the conformity and deviant behaviour of individuals. Narration of stories as a means of ending feuds, is also an integral part of the courts of Sheiks and elders among the Siltie people. Therefore, even if Islam's concept of peace is universal, Siltie faith leaders adopt their own paths for peace making. This idea goes with Abu-Nimer's assertion that, "The religious cosmology of a group, in privileging some values and ideals over others, specifies how restoration, wholeness, and healing can be achieved through distinctive paths of a resolution adopted by different cultures."²⁸

On the other hand, dispute settlement does more than address material clashes of interest; it speaks to social reintegration, restoration and redemption, existential security, personal transcendence and transformation. These concepts are drawn from the backdrop of the sacred, which may be defined as any process that explicitly connects us to the largest possible context to which we belong.²⁹ The role of community leaders in

²⁷ Abu-Nimer, Mohammad, "Conflict Resolution in an Islamic Context," Vol. 21, No. 1. January (1996), 22-40.

²⁸ Abu-Nimer, Conflict Resolution.

²⁹ Seid and Funk, The Role of Faith.

achieving historically and communally acceptable solutions is also particularly evident in Islamic approaches to conflict resolution.³⁰

Faith is a crucial factor in peace building among the Siltie since actors employ various ideas and precepts to reconcile disputants. For instance, by enjoining a broad collection of models of desirable behaviour in situations of dispute while specifically reproaching others, faith leaders implicitly influence the desirability and likelihood of certain courses of action over others.³¹ In this vein, the Siltie also believe that *boze yashe/Tur yawete, boze gize yijejebiyane*. This literally means, "Anyone who intends or does bad actions like attacking some other, either by tongue or hand, or takes other's property, s/he will face the consequence in this world and the hereafter. He may lose his/her life as well "...*behalige Tur atawetu/ Awefe lebale Allah yadeginiyane.*"

One should not disregard the activities of conflict mediators who constantly strive for settling disputes for the peace of the country." "Anyone who forgives, Allah may forgive his/her wrong-doings," are some of the religious teachings faith-based dispute settlers employ to end disputes. This idea seems also to be derived from the various Islamic values and traditions of the local community. Culture can also play an important role in conflict and peace-making, and has affirmed the potential contribution of diverse religious institutions and principles for conflict resolution within divided societies.³² It is observed that the faith-based dimensions of Siltie culture also play an important role in dispute settlement. Thus, faith-based conflict mediators employ various values and local norms as strategies to diffuse tension. Moreover, the Siltie's faith-based dispute settlement and peace making techniques are strongly attached to Islamic precepts from which they derive their context. Restoring relationships is not only crucial among human beings but also vital to link humans with the Divine as the ultimate peace.

Local Religious Practices

The genesis of faith-based dispute settlement institutions goes back to the ancestors of the Siltie sometime in the 9th century. Nevertheless, the significance of local religious practices has strengthened since the late 19th century with the conquest of the Siltie land by the expanding forces of Menilik II. According to Zerihun, two factors are working in the formation and significance of Wali venerating as an important element of local religious practices for the Siltie. First, he noted that they are formed as a result of the Siltie's responses to the formation of the modern Ethiopian Empire in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Second, he noted that the Islamisation process was spearheaded by the Sheiks themselves, whose shrines then played a significant role in the expansion and consolidation of Islam in the area.³³ As I observed in the various parts of Siltie, the Sheiks and their shrines still enjoy legitimacy among the Siltie people and other communities as important sites of pilgrimage and forums for dispute settlement.

The ways contemporary religious figures present themselves as well as how stories of the *Waliye* are narrated contributes to the significance of religious centres and the *Mesbayik*. Self-presentation also affects the forum shopping tendency of members of the

³⁰ Seid and Funk, The Role of Faith.

³¹ Seid and Funk, The Role of Faith, p.5.

³² Avruch, Kevin. Culture and Conflict Resolution. (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998).

³³ Zerihun, Wali, 144.

Siltie. Respecting as well as venerating the religious figures constitutes one of the central religious and communal practices of the Siltie.

The religious centres, mainly of Sufi Shrines, face challenges from Islamic reformists, yet they have existed so far.³⁴ They are also places of festivity, where the local community strengthens the Islamic identity and exchange various ideas about the social and natural environments. This is also potentially important for averting intra and inter-ethnic conflicts in the area and its environs.

Nevertheless, following the attempted introduction of the "Abbash ideology"³⁵ in the last five years, there seems to have been negotiations between the Sufi Sheiks and young educated Muslims on the role of revered religious figures. This is due to the fact that both consider the "Ahhbash" as a new sect which can challenge the practices of Islam. In this vein, the reformists accept the historical roles of the *Walīyes* and their *Mawlid*s for the expansion of Islam in the area. The Sheiks, on the other hand, began to consider the youths' criticisms as emanated from a lack of experience rather than disregard for their roles. However, this negotiation seems temporary as the reformists will not accept the various local Islamic practices as "Islamic", for they regard the local practices as "bi'daa" or innovative. Nevertheless, both groups seem to accept the roles of faith-based modes of conflict mediation for diffusing tensions in the area.

On the other hand, it is observed that local Islamic practices such as *Warrie*, *Līqā*³⁶ and local *Mawlid*s have persisted so far using a number of strategies, *albeit* growing criticism from reformists at least since the 1990s. Previously, the local community resisted the intervention of local officials who considered *Warrie* as "anti-development"³⁷, using strategies like refusing to attend government meetings as a weapon of the weak³⁸, and at times even resorting to violence.³⁹ For the past five years, these practices have revived as a result of the government's change of tack, as it was concerned about the growing influence of the Islamic reformist movements in the country. Due to its proximity to the Middle East, the dynamics of Islamic movements in Ethiopia has been followed closely by Western strategists.

Alkeso Shrine has been given attention by academics who saw the promotion of Sufi movements as a counter strategy to the development of Islamic Reform Movements⁴⁰ which may come to oppose Western interests in the region. The other factor that contributes to the rise of faith-based dispute settlement institutions can be related to the decline of the state legal system owing partly to its inefficiency and incapacity to deliver justice as a result of bad governance, shortage of trained judges

³⁴ Zerihun, Wali, 139; Kairedin, Serra

³⁵ A religious teaching or an Islamic sect whose origin is mainly attributed to Sheik Abdalla al-Harari teachings that follows *Asberīya and Maturdiyya* Sufi creeds. Mustafa Kabha and Haggai Erlich. "Al-Ahhbash and Wahhabiyya: Interpretations of Islam", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Nov., 2006) 519-538.

³⁶ *Warrie* and *Līqā* are local religious practices the Siltie and neighboring people perform in memory of religious figures.

³⁷ Zerihun, Weli, 50.

³⁸ Scott, James, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1985).

³⁹ Zerihun, Weli, 50

⁴⁰ Erlich, Haggai. *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity and Politics Entwined*. (Boulder, Colo and London: Line Rienner Publishers, 2007).

(thirty judges for more than a million population⁴¹) and interference from the political system leading to a lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the local community⁴². Studies show that saints and pilgrimages to their shrines can be taken as an “integrative force” and have integrative roles.⁴³

The *Mashayik*, as the local community call local religious scholars, have extensive roles among the Siltie, not only for the expansion of Islam, but also as important actors who interpret Islamic teaching and teach morality as well as intervene for blessings from Allah . I observed⁴⁴ that the local community resorts to these religious figures for *Du'aa*/prayer during drought and other natural calamities. It is believed among the local community that the *Mashayiks'* *Du'aa* is acceptable, for they are the beloved of Allah in their locality. Thus, faith-based institutions serve as avenues for dispute settlement horizontally among human beings on the one hand, and areas of channelling interactions vertically between human beings and the Divine on the other hand. This is, however, now changing as active, young, educated Salafi religious leaders are becoming more prominent than elders.



A sick woman was brought to the Alkeso Shrine for Faith-Healing (July, 2015).

⁴¹ Annual Report of Siltie Zone High Court, Worabe, July 2016.

⁴²Baker, Bruce. "Where Formal and Informal Justice Meet: Ethiopia's Justice Pluralism," *African Journal of International and Comparative Law* 21.2 (2013): 202–218.

⁴³ Pankhurst, Alula "Reflections on Pilgrimages in Ethiopia," In *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies*. Articles of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (1994).

⁴⁴ I attended annual Alkeso and *Baydi Mawlid*s since 2009 for subsequent seven years. I also observed that the Siltie, mainly lowlanders, went to Alkeso Sheiks for prayer to ask Allah for rain during drought times.

Although the religious significance of the “traditional” *Sheiks* or *Waliyes* and their veneration sites are not totally rejected, the young, educated Muslims have an influential role in changing the perception of the way Islam was traditionally practised and represented among the majority of Muslims.⁴⁵ However, not all *Mesbayiks'* sites fall under criticism by Islamic reformists. As mentioned above, the approbation of some Sufi practices by the reformists are witnessed especially since 2011 following the attempted introduction of the Ahbash sect in the area.

Local Dispute Settlement Institutions

Below I will shed some light on local religious institutions that have a bearing on dispute settlement processes. I will look into the plurality of intra-faith-based institutions of dispute settlement and how plural faith-based dispute settlement institutions interact and compete over dispute cases. They are broadly categorised as nationally recognised religious institutions like *Sharia* courts and locally employed ones such as *Mawlids*, *Liqas*, Sufi Shrines and youth dispute settlement institutions.

The Sharia Courts

The Siltie High *Sharia* court considers cases not only from the six First Instance *Sharia* courts in the zone, but also from *Hadiyya*, and Gurage zones. Despite the fact that these areas are administratively categorised under *Hadiyya* and Gurage zones respectively, the Siltie High *Sharia* court serves as an appellate court for neighbouring areas as well. The proximity of these administrative areas, as well as the cost-effectiveness of delivering the service, become the main factors for this. The *Sharia* court considers such issues as *Nikah* (marriage contract), inheritance and divorce cases. It also considers civil cases up to 5000Birr, wills (*Wesiya*), gifts (*hadiya*), endowments (*Waqf*), and family sustenance cases.

According to my informants, the establishment of the *Sharia* court was attributed to the political agenda of the state rather than the commitment to Shari'a law. The court did not have the mandate to enforce its rulings since the *Sharia* courts are not empowered by the constitution apart from overseeing some private cases provided that both parties want to refer the case to the court⁴⁶. As a result, the *Sharia* court is not chosen by the Muslim community. The local community also mentions the following factors for the decline of the legitimacy of *Sharia* courts. To begin with, the young Salafis consider the Qadis as *Jabil* (ignorant). Second, the court is seen as disloyal to Islamic values. Rather it is considered more loyal to the policies of the state. Some of the *Qadis* themselves stress that they are frustrated by their jobs, for they are not practising the *Sharia* in its true spirit. They also explain that even those rights which have been granted to the court are not fully implemented due to its low level of regard from the government that is manifested by its low allocated budget, which is too small to allow the purchase of office equipment such as computers and copy machines. These circumstances influence the roles of religious actors for conflict transformation.⁴⁷

The empirical data also show that the Siltie *Sharia* courts are very much occupied with *Nikah* (marriage contracts) more than other dispute cases. Nevertheless, I observed

⁴⁵ Zerihun, “Weli ”, 151.

⁴⁶ FDRE, constitution, Art. 34(4), 78(5).

⁴⁷ Appleby, *The Ambivalence*, 222.

from the various courts' files, that the courts consider divorce as well as inheritance cases. The files also indicate that more than 8000 cases have been considered by the courts between 2010-2015. More than 70% of cases are related to *Nikah* contracts, while 20% of cases relate to marital disputes. According to the Siltie zone *Sharia* court report⁴⁸, 10% of the cases are related with *Waqf* (endowments) or dispute claims on Mosques and other minor civil cases.

Based on my *Qadi* informants, the number of cases referred to *Sharia* courts has decreased since the introduction of the revised southern region family law in 2008. This is because of the newly revised law that does not allow the *Sharia* courts to consider inheritance cases. Before this time, the *Sharia* courts were considering divorce and inheritance cases.

Sufi Shrines

Studies show that the *Waliye* venerating practice occupies a central place in the religious as well as communal lives of the Siltie⁴⁹. Zerihun notes that there are three forms of *Waliye* veneration practices among the Siltie. These are: *Mawlid*, *Liqā* and *Warrie*. *Mawlid* is categorised into two: *Mawlid-un-Nabi* and *Mawlid al-Meshayik*, which are the Prophet Mohammed's *Mawlid* and *Meshayik's* *Mawlids* respectively. Since much research has been carried out in this area, I will not go through the first *Mawlid*. The Siltie revere the *Meshayik* and their mosques due to the various roles the *Waliyes* have played for the social order of the area, on the one hand, and the expansion of Islam on the other. Among the most celebrated Sufi Shrines are *Alkeso*, *Dangeye* and *Hajji Aliye*. The local community goes daily, weekly, monthly and annually for prayer, strengthening social solidarity, resolving disputes, blessings, wealth and faith-healing. These areas mainly serve to resolve interfaith, inter-ethnic as well as minor disputes which do not involve blood cases.

Nevertheless, another group of informants⁵⁰ said that local religious practices do not consider dispute cases. Rather, they play a potential role in peace building, since faith leaders advise their followers to give priority to forgiveness and peace rather than retaliation. Moreover, actors of local religious institutions sort out causes of disputes or disputants and hand over the cases to the customary court for dispute settlement. The local community also resorts to these centres during natural calamities like drought and earthquakes perceiving that these disasters can be averted by the intercession of the *Waliyes*, whose *Du'aa*/prayer is believed to be accepted by the Almighty. On the other hand, when disputants feel that their cases have not been resolved by the village or customary court elders, they also resort to the *Meshayiks* for intervention.

Liqā Institution

The second form of *Waliye* venerating practice is *Liqā*. *Liqā* is an Arabic word, which means get-together. According to Zerihun, the institution of *Liqā* is associated with a popular Sufi *Sheik* of the Gurage known as *Qatbarie Shaykh*, Shaykh Isa Hamza (1866–1948).⁵¹ There are three major categories of *Liqā* among the Siltie. These are *Yenebi*

⁴⁸ Siltie Zone Sharia High Court report (Werabe, July 2016).

⁴⁹ Zerihun "Weli "139, Kairedin, Serra, Erlich, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia.

⁵⁰ Interview with Sheik Mohammed, and Ato Usman on 23 February 2016 in Werabe Town.

⁵¹ Zerihun, "Weli "146.

(Prophet Mohammed's, *Geweselazem* (Sheik Abdul Qadir Jaylani of Baghdad), and *Ye Seidina Khedir's Liqa*.

Nevertheless, *Liqa* is mainly practised in Silti Wereda more than other Siltie areas. There are two forms of *Liqa* among the Siltie. The first refers to a social situation at household level where individuals sit together and chew *Khat*, perform prayer, and other social practices as an expressions of Islamic piety. This kind of *Liqa* can be taken as a religious practice for Muslims who aim to become a kind of spiritual client of a *Waliye* of their choice.⁵² The second form of *Liqa*, which the local community calls *Summu Senga Liqa*, is performed at the village level. All the three major *Liqas* are performed twice a month in this context. The participants come mainly from Siltie, Gurage, and Mareqo ethnic groups. Except in Yenebi Liqa, Orthodox Christians also attend the *Liqas*.⁵³ It is important to note that even if the participant's emphasise on the spiritual aspects of the *Liqa* institution, they also engage with issues like dispute cases, local and national development affairs. As the participants gather from various socio-cultural backgrounds, *Liqa* helps the Siltie develop solidarity with other groups. Moreover, *Yebad Baliqe* (the Siltie, Mareqo, and Mesqan Gurage Elders) are selected during *Liqa* gatherings. These individuals serve the community to oversee inter-ethnic conflicts. A good case in point was the post-Siltie zone boundary demarcation in early 2000s. Following the establishment of the Siltie zone, elders who were chosen by *Liqa* members from the Siltie and its environs played pivotal roles in the smooth Siltie-Gurage boundary demarcation process. Moreover, the *Liqa* leaders always pass various messages aimed at peaceful coexistence and forgiveness among members of the community.

Warrie Institution

The third local religious practice which is celebrated twice a month in memory of Sheik Hussein of Bale is called *Warrie*. According to informants, *Warrie*, which is derived from the Mareqo word, means let us come and sit together, mainly serves as a saint venerating practice. The local community also uses it for dispute settlement. The Siltie, Gurage, and Mareqo communities take part in the *Warrie* ritual. Thus, it helps the people strengthen inter-ethnic solidarity with other peoples. The leaders of the *Warrie*, called Imams, give messages to the participants about peaceful coexistence. They also extradite the suspected culprits who flee from various areas, especially after committing murder. The *Warrie* leader disseminates information about local development, and mobilise the community on behalf of the local government.

Salafi Social Committee

The new dispute settlement forum, which has been developed since the 1990s, is the youth's Social Committee. The youths formed their own fora to consider disputes among their own socio-religious group, which was partially in response to the rejection of the customary courts and Sufi-oriented social gatherings on the one hand, and the perceived failure of the *Sharia* courts on the other. Informants said that the precipitating factor behind the genesis of this informal institution is that the *Sharia* court is not working adequately due to its limited constitutional rights, the interference of the political system and inefficiency of the *Qadis*. The group sets up the Social Committee that informally

⁵² Zerihun "Weli" 147.

⁵³ Interview with Imam Yirdawe Juhar Hajji Sultan Hamza/Yenebi Liqa coordinator/, Silti wereda and Werabe town on 16, 17 January, 2016.

considers on *Nikab* contracts, disputes between husband and wife, supports the needy. The group does not have its own structure, yet gathers whenever the need arises. It is led by youths who are university graduates and civil servants. The group does not have a name, yet it is widely preferred by those youths who are now becoming emerging Siltie elites.

Faith Actors' Approaches to Peace Building

Despite the fact that various religious traditions have been used to justify conflict and violence throughout history, it is also observed that the same religious ideas are employed for peace building processes by religious actors.⁵⁴ The Siltie faith actors and customary court judges, for instance, always say, "*ladege yaadiginijane*" (for one who forgives, Allah will forgive him) as a strategy to reconcile disputants. They also frequently said that the divine reward will be multiplied for the one who forgives earlier. Mystic construct, and changing the negative perceptions of the disputants or the "other", and constructing positive relationships by interpreting the dispute positively, rather than exacerbating enmity or revenge are also approaches dispute settlers employ for peace building among the local community.

Berbe, defined as an unresolved dispute or hidden wrongdoing, among disputants of the past, is also taken seriously as a factor for one to resort to violence. Actors also associate the various calamities and accidents including environmental ones, such as the delay of rain, or personal ones, such as car accidents, illness or failure in business, to *Berbe*, and the failure to implement the decisions of elders or faith leaders in the dispute settlement process. They first look for crimes or any wrongdoing in the family of the accuser, for it is believed among the Siltie that anyone can perpetrate a crime or become a victim owing to an unaddressed *Berbe* in his family, relatives or lineage up to his ancestors. This is also one of the strategies conflict mediators employ to reinforce their legitimacy. Added to this, religious precepts like forgiveness and divine reward have been used as tools to end disputes among parties. Studies show that irrespective of how they are used or abused, most religious systems incorporate ideals of peace and promise peace as the outcome of their application.⁵⁵

Religious actors employ various techniques to resolve disputes. To begin with, religious leaders instruct the followers about peace and forgiveness during religious sermons (such as Friday sermon) emphasising forgiveness and developing harmonious relationships, both among human beings and humans with the Divine, as a source of blessings and reward in the hereafter.

Here, faith leaders emphasise nonviolence over violence, and forgiveness (*afu*) over retribution to receive the blessings of both worlds. Second, dispute settlers also employ local religious institutions like Liqas and Sufi Shrines as dispute settlement forums for transferring messages of peace and cooperation among the members of the belief and beyond. Third, both religious and customary court dispute settlers employ religious precepts as a strategy for restructuring relationships between disputants focusing on maintaining the *status quo* rather than sanctioning norms. Fourth, dispute settlers also narrate mythologies which embody the failures and success of individuals by linking the

⁵⁴ Appleby, 2000.

⁵⁵ Seid and Funk, The Role of Faith 31.

episodes with those individuals who could not stick to the faith's values and decisions of conflict mediators and abide by them respectively. Actors also employ faith-based institutions not only as instruments of dispute settlements, but also tools for political mobilisation during inter-ethnic dispute between the Siltie and Gurage.⁵⁶



The Siltie elders at a *village* level session, *Alichu Wuriro*, while making blessings before commencing dispute settlement.

On the other hand, I have learned from the daily activities of local legal experts' *Raga*/ narrations that the local legal actors consider and portray their jobs (mediating work) as having been bestowed upon them by Allah as a trustee. This can be considered as a strategy to strengthen the conflict mediator's power. Conflict mediators also employ narrating religious myths, and stories as strategies to reinforce their legitimacy. These stories help them justify their job and generate local power.

Conclusion

Ethiopia has witnessed the revival of popular Islamic practices including the Sheiks' shrines and *Mawlids* as places of social solidarity and centres of dispute settlements since the 1990s. The *Sharia* courts judges face challenges from a number of actors such as the constitution, the officials, the state court judges, and the community.

It is also worth recalling that religious ideas and values are the most important factors mediators use to build peace in the community. Exploiting the institutional inability of the state legal system to deliver justice, faith-based modes of disputes settlement have manoeuvred the opportunity to play a significant role in delivering justice at the grassroots level. The Salafists, on the other hand, make use of the failure of the *Sharia* and the state courts to deliver justice to the community indicating the existence of

⁵⁶ Zerihun, Weli, 149.

generational conflict between the old and the young. The religious precepts and traditions play a pivotal role in maintaining social and moral deviations. This scenario boosts the legitimacy of actors of faith-based and customary institutions of dispute settlements *vis a vis* other legal systems. Local dispute settlers employ both religious and cultural legal perceptions not only to end disputes but also, to contend for more legitimacy. Thus, hybridisation of the legal sphere seems to be an emerging socio-legal practice among the local community.

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