

# Religious Dynamics and Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia: Expansion, Protection, and Reclaiming Space

Terje Østebø 

**Abstract:** Ethiopia has often been portrayed as a unique case of peaceful inter-religious relations. The country has, however, seen an increase in violence between religious communities over the last decades, something which has been interpreted within the prism of extremism. Analyzing inter-religious dynamics in Ethiopia, Østebø argues that the notion of extremism is an inadequate analytical tool, and proposes instead an alternative approach that explores how mutually constitutive developments within each of the main religious communities in Ethiopia together have contributed to exacerbate inter-religious tensions. In particular, Østebø suggests a typology consisting of the intersected processes of expansion, protection, and reclaiming of space.

**Résumé :** L'Éthiopie a souvent été dépeinte comme un cas unique de relations interreligieuses pacifiques. Le pays a toutefois connu une augmentation de la violence entre les communautés religieuses au cours des dernières décennies, ce qui a été interprété dans le prisme de l'extrémisme. Analysant les dynamiques interreligieuses en Éthiopie, Østebø soutient que la notion d'extrémisme est un outil d'analyse

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inadéquat et propose plutôt une approche alternative qui explore comment les développements mutuellement constitutifs au sein de chacune des principales communautés religieuses en Éthiopie ont contribué à exacerber les tensions interreligieuses. En particulier, Østebø suggère une typologie consistant en les processus croisés d'expansion, de protection et de récupération de l'espace.

**Resumo :** A Etiópia tem sido frequentemente retratada como um caso singular de relações inter-religiosas pacíficas. No entanto, ao longo das últimas décadas, o país tem assistido a um aumento da violência entre comunidades religiosas, fenómeno que tem sido interpretado na ótica do extremismo. Østebø analisa a dinâmica inter-religiosa na Etiópia e argumenta que a ideia de extremismo é uma ferramenta analítica inadequada. Em vez disso, propõe uma abordagem alternativa, através da qual explora o modo como, em conjunto, os desenvolvimentos mutuamente constitutivos ocorridos no interior das principais comunidades religiosas contribuíram para exacerbar as tensões inter-religiosas. Em especial, Østebø propõe uma tipologia constituída pelos processos interrelacionados de expansão, proteção e exigência de espaço.

**Keywords:** Ethiopia; Islam; Orthodox Christianity; Protestantism; politics; Abiy Ahmed; inter-religious conflict

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## Introduction

On August 4, 2018, violence struck in Jijiga in the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia, where young rioters burned churches and killed several priests.<sup>1</sup> This was part of a larger round of unrest, resulting in at least 58 fatalities and 266 people injured. In addition, property damages were reported to amount to 421 million Birr.<sup>2</sup> More recently, on April 26, 2022, over thirty Muslims were reportedly killed, over a hundred injured, and Muslim property burned by what was referred to as “Christian extremists” in the city of Gondar in the Amhara region. Subsequently, Orthodox Christians churches were burned elsewhere in the country.<sup>3</sup> These incidents are only a few of several violent clashes that have occurred between religious communities over the last decade or so, causing many to ask whether we are seeing a phase upending earlier and relatively peaceful inter-religious relations in Ethiopia.

While Ethiopia certainly has experienced peaceful coexistence, it is also important to remember that religious conflicts always have been an integral and parallel part of Ethiopian history (Hussein Ahmed 2006). It is similarly important to relate the impression of rising inter-religious tensions to the fact that scholars and analysts have largely overlooked religion in Ethiopia, in spite of its obvious relevance for societal life, thus leaving us with very limited understandings of contemporary religious development and discourses. It is only when violent conflict flares up that religion attracts attention, causing surprise and bewilderment among observers.

The lack of attention to religious issues can also be explained by the salience of ethnicity in Ethiopian politics, and by how increased inter-ethnic tensions and recurrent conflicts over the last three decades have overshadowed other dynamics. There is also the tendency to overlook how religious and ethnic identities in Ethiopia remain entwined, to the extent that it sometimes is difficult to understand one without the other. The two constitute parallel dimensions that may dovetail and reinforce each other, entrenching divisions and strengthening tensions (Østebø 2020).

This article maps out and analyzes the developments over the last decades that have impacted inter-religious relations, exacerbated polarization, and produced conflicts. It utilizes recent ethnographical data collected as part of two commissioned research projects (Østebø & Tronvoll 2020; Østebø et al. 2021) as well as data collected through decades of fieldwork in Ethiopia. The article also draws upon and reviews earlier studies carried out on this topic, and is therefore an essay that reviews and synthesizes recent findings with existing analyses, and which offers new reflections on current developments.

Previous attempts to understand inter-religious tensions have generally used the notion of extremism as the analytical framework, wherein violence is viewed as a result of the arrival of so-called extremist ideologies, particularly among Muslims (International Crisis Group 2016). Jon Abbink, for example, by focusing on violent activism by Muslims, lumps extremism into a “*united* narrative that connects all cases and works via ideological contagion and mimesis” (Abbink 2020:196, italics in original). Contagion is, for Abbink, outside (Arab) influence, which “infects” otherwise peaceful “traditional” Muslims with its extremist ideas. Extremism remains, however, a highly problematic concept and inadequate analytical tool. The many definitions of extremism generally speak about ideas and acts that are far beyond the mainstream and that are outside what is commonly accepted in society. Yet the concept lacks clear definitional criteria; it tends to be used in very subjective manners, and it is usually presented as an inevitable moderate-extremist dichotomy or teleological trajectory (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins 2009; Sedwick 2010).<sup>4</sup> The extremist framework, moreover, lures us to pay attention to particular religious communities or groups, trying to identify “faults” within that group and thus treating religious dynamics in rather isolated ways without recognizing simultaneous developments in other communities and their reciprocal effects.

While Ethiopia, as elsewhere, may host groups and ideas that are beyond the commonly accepted norms, the extremist framework arguably fails to capture the complexity of the Ethiopian religious landscape and emerging conflicts. My alternative approach is to pay attention to and analyze developments and dynamics within each of the main religious communities in Ethiopia—Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and Protestants—arguing that they all have contributed to inter-religious tensions. In order to fully understand these dynamics and changes, I suggest a typology consisting of the intersected and mutually constitutive processes of expansion, protection, and reclaiming of space.

Space is here not merely understood as abstract and symbolic, but also as something materially grounded, through which embodied actors interact. As all of these religious communities have existed and continue to exist in close proximity to one another, I demonstrate how these processes have produced contesting claims and counterclaims, the assertion and re-demarkation of boundaries, and increased tension and conflict. While I focus on contemporary dynamics, current changes and developments do not, obviously, occur in a historical vacuum; it is therefore critical to recognize how ongoing current processes are situated within histories of conflict, existing fault lines, and imaginations of the other.

I will start framing my discussion conceptually by reflecting on notions of religion and space, and how these relate to secularity and processes of secularization in Ethiopia. I will then continue with a discussion of my typology of the different processes and demonstrate how it allows us to better understand inter-religious tensions. I include some remarks on the question of ethnicity toward the end, but have, mostly for heuristic purposes, chosen to mainly limit myself to a focus on religion.

### **The Secular and the Religious—and Space**

While the processes of expanding, protecting, and reclaiming space may be of a discursive nature, related to the contestation of symbols and ideas, it is at the same time important to recognize that religious actors are unavoidably situated within spatial realities—and that these are more than a backdrop for social and discursive activity (Knott 2005; Kong 2010). Rather than talking about “social, mental or physical space” as separate from each other (Knott 2005:28), I find it more fruitful to apply an integrative approach where these cannot be meaningfully disentangled, where social relations, mental maps, and physical space are mutually co-constituent. This certainly has relevance when we talk about inter-religious conflicts, or conflicts more broadly, where violence is inherently visceral and material. It also has relevance when we think about religion, which not only is constituted by ideas and symbols, but is also materially present in religious institutions and buildings, embodied in people, enacted through collective rituals in physical spaces, and visible in material objects—all entangled together.

Talking about space, it is common to think of religion existing in—and restricted to—certain sites. Although the earlier dichotomy between the sacred and the profane (Eliade 1959) has long proven untenable, it is still common to differentiate between religious spaces and secular spaces (Kong & Woods 2016). While there surely are certain sites set apart for religious performance and dissemination of religious knowledge—demarkated from other spaces where regulations against such practices exist—this does not necessarily mean that religious performance is always restricted to these so-called religious places, and neither does it mean that space more broadly is seen as devoid of any divine or supernatural presence. This is certainly the case in Ethiopia, where certain spaces are also viewed as imbued with danger,

requiring the performance of rituals and the presence of religious objects that protect against perceived calamities. Religious places are also viewed as materially radiant sites, most obvious in the case of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, where the concentric architecture of its churches reflects the degree of holiness, and where the power of the *tobot* stretches beyond the boundaries of the church (Hannig 2013).<sup>5</sup> In addition, there are spaces that temporally would be ascribed with religious meaning.

Landscapes are often dotted with buildings such as churches and mosques in close proximity to each other, which make it obvious that religious sites are not isolated islands. While these particular buildings to varying degrees are restricted to the members of each different religious community, these members will—as embodied actors—crisscross the same shared landscape where encounters take place on a daily basis. Proximity, inter-religious encounters, and boundaries in a religiously heterogeneous context easily produce tensions and even conflict, heightened by socio-political developments and dynamics within the different religious communities. While such tensions are, somewhat simplistically, understood as rooted in competition over space (Kong & Woods 2016), I believe that my proposed typology of intersected processes of expansion, protection, and reclaiming of space provides us with a better entry point to this complexity, enabling us to grasp how religious groups navigate within fluctuating landscapes.

Relating these ideas about religion and space to the context of Ethiopia allows one to interrogate some of the dichotomies between the secular and the religious, and between the public and the private, that tend to be taken for granted. Ethiopia is constitutionally a secular state, introduced by the Derg regime (1974–91) and later confirmed by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front regime (EPRDF, 1991–2019). Not only did the two regimes subscribe to the Habermasian secularist idea of the public sphere as an arena for “rational” discourses (Habermas 1987), but their leftist leanings meant that religion was largely seen as irrelevant and as ill-fitting with their own hegemonic ideologies. This was also why religion, until very recently, was strikingly absent from official political debates. Religion was seldom a subject for discussion in the mainstream media, and was only anecdotally referred to in official statements.<sup>6</sup>

Religion, however, is highly present in Ethiopia—visible in churches and mosques, materialized in clothing, and enacted through public rituals. The Ethiopian case thus very clearly illustrates that secularism is not the same as absence of religion (Asad 2003) and that “secularization of the state is not the same as secularization of the society” (Habermas 2011:23). In contrast to most Western societies, secularization, in the sense of decreased adherence to formalized religion, de-institutionalization, as well as individualization and privatization of religion, has been limited in Ethiopia. Religion remains, similar to other African contexts, prominent in people’s lives and is connected to their collective identities, where religious adherence and enactment of religion are not primarily expressed through “interior, personal, and

utterly unique states and dispositions” (McCutcheon 2003:55), and thus not only restricted to the private sphere.

This points to the dilemma of positing the secular and religious as two exclusive opposites, and shows how problematic it is to think of the secular and the religious as mutually exclusive or as existing in a teleological continuum. As noted by Matthew Engelke (2015) for Africa in general and by Jörg Hausteine (2020) for Ethiopia in particular, both drawing from Talal Asad (2003), the religious and the secular are “co-existent concepts that are occasionally competing and mutually reinforcing epistemic regimes” (Hausteine 2020:367). Pointing to our limited understanding of “secular formations” in Africa, Engelke argues that we need to pay attention to the “secular shadows” (Engelke 2015:87). Contrary to the teleological idea of secularization, the arrival of what is called the secular does not inevitably reduce the religious, but instead becomes just another addition to a religiously saturated landscape of options through which people are continually navigating (Hausteine 2020).

Developments in Ethiopia from the early 1990s clearly illustrate how inadequate the assumed secular-religious divide is. When the EPRDF lifted the Derg regime’s restrictions on religious practice, the result was a revitalization of activities within all religious communities. People flocked to churches and mosques, displaying their continued adherence to the tenets of their respective traditions. Different religious reform movements were moreover pivotal for further boosting religious practice. Among Protestants, Pentecostal and Charismatic beliefs and practices have significantly increased, impacting the already existing churches and leading to the formation of numerous new churches and ministries. A number of Islamic reform movements have emerged within the Muslim community, challenging established religious practices. Reformist movements have also affected the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahado Church (EOTC), seeking to reinvigorate the church’s traditions. The emergence of these reform movements has led to increased religious heterogeneity and fragmentation within the different religious communities, and has also contributed to the creation of a more rugged religious landscape and complicated the demarcation of boundaries.

The changes brought by Abiy Ahmed, who ascended as the new prime minister in 2018, also included giving space to religion in Ethiopian politics. More research is needed on this area, and it is too soon to predict the actual impacts of these changes. As a practicing Pentecostal Christian, he openly made repeated references to his faith and termed his vision of a new Ethiopia using a semi-religious vocabulary of hope and love (Hausteine & Dereje Feyissa 2022). He even claimed his rise to power had been prophesied by his mother more than a decade ago. The new prime minister also took an active role involving himself in internal religious affairs, becoming engaged in the reconciliation process between the EOTC and its exile synod and in reconfiguring the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC), which culminated in lifting the Council to legal parity with the EOTC.<sup>7</sup> He was

moreover instrumental in establishing—alongside the already existing Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia—the Ethiopian Evangelical Council.

Abiy Ahmed also opened the door for religious speech to enter the official political rhetoric, seen for example by how he ended his political addresses with the phrase “May God bless Ethiopia and all its people.” Including such a phrase would have been unthinkable during the Derg and EPRDF periods. The religious rhetoric was particularly evident in his 2021 Easter address, where he compared the experience of Ethiopia, which then was fighting the Tigrayan forces, with Christ’s suffering and crucifixion, proclaiming that Ethiopia would, like Christ, be resurrected and emerge victorious.<sup>8</sup> Some, like René Lefort, have argued that Abiy Ahmed has reversed secularism and re-enchanted Ethiopian public space, claiming that he aims to “Pentecostalize Ethiopian politics.”<sup>9</sup> This reflects an inadequate image of the secular-religious divide, and may be a premature prediction.

As others have noted, Abiy Ahmed is not a typical “narrow ‘Pente’ politician” (Haustein & Dereje Feyissa 2022).<sup>10</sup> Different from the traditionally exclusive worldview of Pentecostalism, his rhetoric is of a more inclusive nature, making it possible to think about this as a form of an Ethiopian civic religion (cf. Bellah 1967). His references to “God of Ethiopia” potentially speak to both Muslims and Orthodox Christians.<sup>11</sup> His statements moreover correspond with the legacy of religiously-infused Ethiopian nationalism, harking back to Ethiopia’s divine exceptionalism as espoused in the *Kebele Negast*. His religious remarks can, however, sometimes be confusing, and he tends to adjust his language according to his audience. For example, when he addressed a Christian Orthodox community, he underscored EOTC’s importance for Ethiopia at the expense of other religious groups, saying that “we cannot think of Ethiopia without the Orthodox Church, the Orthodox Church is in itself a country.”<sup>12</sup>

While Abiy Ahmed’s policy may have opened up space for religion, the state continues to assert itself as the watchful eye over religious affairs, thus partly continuing the previous regime’s policies (Haustein 2020:380). Compared to previous regimes, there is, however, one important difference. The EPRDF’s interference in religious affairs was guided by a notion of divide and rule, but Abiy Ahmed’s activities—by seeking to mend religious divisions—are based upon a policy of “unite and rule,” much in line with his *medemer* philosophy. The state’s hegemonic “ideology of order” (Juergensmeyer 2011) seems, in other words, to be intact, forcing religious groups to continue “to negotiate and accommodate their priorities with those of a government that competes with them in orienting, controlling and disciplining peoples’ lives” (Fantini 2013:212).

## Expanding Space

Returning to the proposed typology of intersected processes of expansion, protection, and reclaiming of space, probably the most evident process is that of expansion of space. When such expansions are, as we will see,

simultaneously undertaken by different religious communities, the result is a situation of competition that easily spurs reactions, which in turn have the potential to spiral into violent conflicts.

The most obvious form of such expansion has come in the form of proselytization, mainly from the side of the Protestants, who see evangelism as their core activity. This is also a departure from the past, as Ethiopia's historical religious groups, Muslims and Orthodox Christians, have traditionally been less active in seeking to convert the other. While frequent inter-religious encounters have been common throughout history, there have always existed important conventions that accommodated plurality and managed relations (Dulin 2020). Emperor Haile Selassie granted Protestant missionaries access to Ethiopia in the 1940s, but restricted it to southern Ethiopia, which included regions beyond the core Orthodox areas which were largely inhabited by adherents of traditional religions and Muslims. The different mission societies immediately divided the area among themselves for purposes of evangelism, and experienced rapid and significant growth, even during the Derg period (1974–91). When the Derg's restrictions on evangelism ended, opportunities emerged for more concerted efforts in new areas and in urban centers, leading to a steady flow of Orthodox Christians into Protestant churches. Several Protestant denominations also gradually embarked on a strategy to reach out to the Muslims, expanding their presence in Muslim-dominated areas by building churches and establishing development projects. As a result, there has been a significant increase of Protestants in Ethiopia, growing from 10 percent in 1994 to roughly 18 percent in 2007 (Central Statistical Office 1994, 2007).

Subsequent data from the Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) suggests that the numbers grew to over 27 percent in 2019. The number of Orthodox Christians has, in contrast, declined from around 50 percent to 43 percent between 1994 and 2007. Such a shifting religious demography has spurred Orthodox Christians to also engage in proselyting activities. The Orthodox reform movement Mahabere Qidusan has, for example, initiated several large-scale evangelization projects in parts of the country where the EOTC has no historical presence, including remote areas such as South Omo (Meron Zeleke 2015a:74ff).

The process of expansion is also evidenced in the numerical growth materialized in construction of new religious infrastructure. While Protestant churches have dotted the landscape in the south for decades, more recent expansions have come in the form of new—and often large—Protestant churches in the traditionally Orthodox areas in the north. There has also been a significant growth in the number of mosques across the country. Many of them, particularly in urban areas, are rather large, and the common claim is that these are financed by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. While actual figures are hard to obtain, the vast majority of mosques seem to have been funded by local communities and wealthy Ethiopian Muslim individuals, while Saudi religious support and presence in Ethiopia have declined over the last decade (Østebø 2022). Many Protestant churches remain, on the

other hand, closely attached to Western missionary organizations, and Pentecostals often receive generous donations from evangelical groups in the United States.

Expansion of space has also had a more temporal character. While the “takeover” of public spaces at certain moments is not necessarily something new, occurring regularly outside urban mosques during Friday prayers and on Christian Orthodox holidays such as *timket* (Epiphany), this is something that has intensified in recent years. During the last years’ celebrations of *timket*, for example, numerous streets in Addis Ababa and other major cities were closed off for hours as processions moved slowly through them and thousands of coordinated young volunteers adorned the public space with flags, posters, and other ornaments related to the Orthodox faith. Another recent example of this type of expanding space was the so-called Grand *Iftar* which was organized in the streets of Addis Ababa on May 11, 2021.<sup>13</sup> It was claimed that over 100,000 Muslims gathered for prayer and an *iftar* meal in the streets of the capital—allegedly the largest public *iftar* meal in the world.<sup>14</sup> While Muslims have gathered for years at the Addis Ababa stadium for prayer during Eid al-Fitr, this was the first time Muslims had taken over the streets in such a manner. Public *iftar* meals increased in 2022, celebrated across the country.

Processes of expansion also have a distinct embodied character which is made visible through changes in dress code, important as a signifier of religious belonging. While Orthodox Christians, for example, traditionally have been identifiable through their wearing of the *matab*, the usage of necklaces with large crosses has become increasingly common over the last decades.<sup>15</sup> More noticeable changes in dress codes have been seen among Muslims, with the *kofiya* and *thawb* becoming more popular among men, while the use of *hijab* and *niqab* has increased among women.<sup>16</sup> The former has become common for all Muslim women, and while it does not necessarily reflect any degree of personal piety, this is more the case for the latter, and women wearing the *niqab* are usually associated with the Salafi reform movement. Wearing of the *hijab* and, in particular, the *niqab* are in many contexts highly contested, and Ethiopia is no exception. The *niqab* is viewed by many non-Muslims as a sign of more a “extremist” Islam, while the presence of the *hijab* is interpreted to indicate an increase in the number of Muslims in Ethiopia. There is, however, little evidence to support such claims, and a more accurate interpretation would be to understand this as an enhanced presence of Islam in the public, with the female body as a site for religious signification and the cultivation of distinction (Mahmood 2005; Gökariksel & Secor 2013).

The process of expansion is also taking place in the soundscape, through the broadcasting of religious prayers, services, and sermons via loudspeakers attached to churches and mosques, as well as emanating from shops and minibuses. Abbink has called this phenomenon “acoustic wars,” where a “massive religious noise production” contributes to “enveloping people who may not want or need to hear them” (2011:269). The arrival of new

technology and new forms of media represents a shift from earlier times, when sounds were more restricted and limited within certain spaces—such as churches and mosques—and targeted at specific audiences. As these spaces were “off limits” for the other, the sounds of religion remained compartmentalized, leaving any outsider unaware and unaffected.

Now, however, religious sound is reaching everyone, whether one wants to hear or not, which has resulted in the blurring of boundaries and contributed to a more complex soundscape. It is important to underscore that while proselytization might be part of the objective, broadcasted prayers and sermons are mainly directed toward the members of the respective religious communities, reminding them to attend religious services and more broadly to reaffirm and assert each different community’s presence throughout the public space. Nevertheless, the expanded flow and availability of religious messages throughout the soundscape has augmented inter-religious encounters and generated more tensions.

These tangible processes of expansion are accompanied by discourses where religious groups seek to position themselves in relation to each other and to assert themselves as part of the sociopolitical fabric of Ethiopia. While Protestants have traditionally shied away from political engagement, during the 2000s, some Pentecostals increasingly started to emphasize how spiritual renewal could contribute to transforming the country (Haustein & Dereje Feyissa 2022). Young pastors of churches such as the Unic 7000 Church and the Exodus Apostolic Reformation Church encouraged Christians to make themselves visible and relevant within the broader public space. This can partly be traced back to the notion of a “holistic approach” which, besides evangelism, emphasized the positive role of Christian virtues and morale toward the transformation of the country, while also reflecting a new perception that politics can be purified “through the active involvement of righteous people” (Fantini 2013:214, 220ff). Similar sentiments have emerged among Muslims, who emphasize the transformative capacity of Islam and its relevance for Ethiopia’s development. The argument is that Muslims should participate in their capacity as citizens, and as they embody Islamic virtues, the result would be a morally upright and progressive society.<sup>17</sup> While these notions of religion’s transformative nature dovetail with Abiy Ahmed’s semi-religious rhetoric, it is too early to predict what lasting impacts either may have.

Expansion also has taken the form of both Protestants and Muslims challenging what they perceive to be an Orthodox cultural hegemony. Lily Kong and Orlando Woods (2016:26) have called this an entrant-incumbent competition, wherein new religious groups challenge established religious groups and question their hegemonic position. Islam is, of course, not a new religion in Ethiopia, compared with Protestantism, but as Muslims are actively seeking to confront what they see as a prevailing Orthodox Christian domination in Ethiopia, the entrant-incumbent perspective has some relevance. One important aspect of the Muslims’ contestation has been to address Ethiopia’s historical narrative, emphasizing how the Christian confessional

state suppressed the Muslim population. Such notions had already surfaced in the 1990s (Carmichael 1996; Hussein Ahmed 1998), and were reactivated in 2011 when Ahmedin Jebel, a Muslim journalist and activist, published the book *Ethiopian Muslim: A History of Domination and Resistance*. Muslim activists have also argued that EPRDF's policy of religious freedom under the secular order has done little to subvert the continuous Christian dominance, and that real religious equality has remained an illusion. Such sentiments resurfaced during the already mentioned Grand *Iftar* event in May 2021. When the government first sought to ban the event, protesters clashed with the police, and it was believed that the ban was a result of pressure from the EOTC.<sup>18</sup> Ahmedin Jebel came out with a statement saying that "Muslims refuse anything less than equality and will not accept being second class citizens" and, referring to other incidents, argued that the EOTC received preferential treatment from the government.<sup>19</sup> The city authorities eventually reversed their decision, allowing the event to take place.<sup>20</sup> These efforts of redressing the Muslims' perceived peripheral position can, as I have argued elsewhere (Østebø 2016), be understood as a particular "politics of recognition." Different from other forms of such politics, which are often aimed at seeking greater autonomy, politics of recognition among Ethiopian Muslims are more about demands for enhanced inclusion, about being recognized as part of the Ethiopian national and socio-cultural fabric as Muslims, and about the recognition and respect of Muslims rights.

The Protestants have managed this in a subtler manner, and the initial arrival of Protestantism through Western missionaries in the non-Orthodox southern areas provided the different ethnic groups with a socio-cultural capital by which they could negotiate their status vis-à-vis the dominant Orthodox Amhara/Tigray establishment (Eide 2000:83). The establishment of a range of national Protestant churches solidified this, and seeking to counter claims of being "latecomers" and "foreign," they have been careful to emphasize their indigenous standing (Haustein 2014:4).

Religious television channels (which have increased rapidly over the last decade) and social media platforms have become important venues for religious activism, significantly contributing to intensified polarization and exacerbated tensions. Except for a few studies (Meron Zeleke 2015b), very little detailed research has been conducted on the plethora of media sites and actors involved in online activism. A number of Muslim, Orthodox, and Protestant Christian online activists have established their own blogs, YouTube channels, and Facebook pages, where they—in addition to religious preaching—often launch polemic attacks against each other, thus accentuating violent conflicts and deepening notions of hatred.<sup>21</sup>

## Protecting Space

Processes of expansion have inevitably intensified the different religious communities' protective mode, where expansion of one is perceived as encroachment by the other. As the different communities exist in proximity

to each other, protecting one's space may take the form of reaffirming boundaries and actively challenging the other. The result can be violent conflicts, seen for example in Kemisse in the Oromo Special Zone of Amhara Region, where the reaction of Muslims to a Christian evangelizing pamphlet led to the destruction of Orthodox and Protestant churches (International Crisis Group 2016:5).

As proselytization entails expansion of religion in a material manner, with the construction of churches, mosques, or other religious infrastructure, violent reactions are often directed toward such buildings. During the 1990s and 2000s, there were clashes between Orthodox and Protestant Christians in the cities of Bahr Dar and Mekelle, where the Orthodox communities viewed the large Protestant churches as competing with Orthodox ones (Haustein & Østebø 2011:759). The construction of new mosques in traditionally Orthodox areas has also been contested; the building of mosques in the towns of Axum and Lalibela—viewed by Orthodox Christians as particularly sacred places—has been particularly controversial. Tensions had risen already in 1992 in Axum, when the attempt to construct a mosque was met with stiff opposition from Christians, causing violent clashes and forcing security forces to intervene. The fact that there still is no mosque in Axum is, according to the Muslims, a demonstration of continuous religious imbalance that perturbs secularism.<sup>22</sup>

Attacks on religious infrastructure also occurred in Jimma and Wollega (Oromia region) in 2006 and 2010, when Muslims accused Protestant development activities of being a disguise for evangelizing. This culminated in the burning of several Protestant as well as Orthodox churches and private homes (Zelalem Temesgen 2010; International Crisis Group 2016:4).<sup>23</sup> The destruction of churches and mosques seems to have increased in recent years, as evidenced by the attacks in Jijiga, mentioned in the introduction, which were particularly violent. In the wake of this incident, stories of burnings or destructions of other religious buildings rapidly spread, and in September 2019, large Orthodox Christian demonstrations occurred throughout the Amhara region, lamenting the alleged burning of churches.<sup>24</sup> A couple of months later, Orthodox Christian youth attacked and destroyed mosques and Muslim property in the town of Mota, in the Amhara region. The violence was caused by rumors that the Muslims had set fire to one of the town's churches; four mosques were reportedly burned, and 156 other properties attacked, looted, and burned.<sup>25</sup> Whether the church actually was subject to arson remains unclear, and many of the stories about church and mosque burnings are unconfirmed, making it important to treat them with care.<sup>26</sup> In the case of Mota, the lack of conclusion clearly affected Christian-Muslim relations, and through our research into the incident, we found a deeply divided community, reluctant to speak about it, but also evidencing mistrust and misgivings about the religious other.<sup>27</sup>

The recent incident in Gondar, also mentioned in the introduction, was even more deadly, with over 30 individuals reportedly killed. While regional authorities described it as an inter-religious conflict, thus equally blaming

both the Orthodox Christian and the Muslim communities, Muslims argued that it was a well-coordinated attack on Muslims by the local Orthodox Christians.<sup>28</sup> The violence started during the funeral procession for a famous local Muslim scholar and quickly spread to other parts of the city. The regional authorities subsequently arrested 373 individuals, but this did not satisfy the Muslim community, which argued that the incident was a result of growing hate speech against Muslims.<sup>29</sup>

Spatial proximity during the performance of religious rituals has also caused “too-close” encounters, activated protective modes, and in some instances led to violence. This was the case in Kemisse in 2001, where the procession of Christians celebrating the *timket* holiday came too close to Muslims preparing for prayer at the town’s mosque, resulting in violent clashes with casualties on both sides. A similar conflict occurred in Harar the same year, also resulting in fatalities (Hussein Ahmed 2006:17; International Crisis Group 2016: 5). People also claimed that the smoke coming from the Orthodox Christian *meskel* celebration seeping into a neighboring mosque sparked the conflict in Jimma in 2006.<sup>30</sup> Violent conflicts also erupted during the *timket* celebrations in Dire Dawa and Harar in January 2020, leaving one person dead in Dire Dawa, and two in Harar. In Harar, eleven buildings were damaged, and two cars were set on fire – all owned by Muslims.<sup>31</sup> And again, clashes during *timket* in 2022 in the town of Burayu, just outside of Addis Ababa, left two individuals dead.<sup>32</sup>

A particular form of protectionism can be seen within Ethiopia’s Muslim community, where what I call “politics of withdrawal” have caused certain segments to isolate themselves from broader societal engagement. This is especially noticeable among some Ethiopian Salafis, who, devoted to maintaining the purity of Islamic practices and symbols, have remained rather secluded and xenophobic.<sup>33</sup> What is ironic here is that Ethiopian Salafis are usually regarded, both by the government and outside observers, as a politically active group whose efforts are aimed at building an Islamic state. One small fringe group was the so-called Takfir wal Hijra group, which made inroads among young Muslims from 1994 to 1995. The group lost much of its momentum in the mid-2000s, but seems to have re-emerged in the areas around Jimma a few years later. Reports about Muslims refusing to hold Ethiopian ID cards and to pay taxes point in this direction (Zelalem Temesgen 2010:81), and it is moreover believed that this group was instrumental in escalating inter-religious conflicts in Jimma and Wollega in 2006 and in 2010–11. Another group is the Madkhaliyya group, which draws inspiration from the Saudi quietist scholar Sheikh Rabi al-Madkhali and is mostly focused on educating the youth according to their version of Salafism. While these groups remain small and on the fringe, such “politics of withdrawal” in the form of shunning societal involvement, exclusivist attitudes, and acts of seclusion toward other religious groups (both Christians and fellow Muslims) run the risk of negatively impacting the accommodation of religious pluralism in Ethiopia.

Protection of the public sphere from religion is an inherent aspect of the secularist state, where such areas as shared spaces, public land, and government buildings are to be sites free from any religious expressions. This has been unevenly practiced in Ethiopia, where religion, even if it was excluded from political debates, is present everywhere—including government offices.<sup>34</sup> As mentioned, there are also established practices where the political authorities actively accommodate the celebration of large religious holidays, such as during *timket* and *mesqel*, allowing streets to be closed and traffic to be redirected. While the authorities view this as honoring Ethiopia's national heritage, Muslims view these large public celebrations of Orthodox Christian holidays as proof of continued preference for the EOTC.

One aspect of the government's attempts to protect public space is arguably connected to its perception of the specter of "Islamic extremism." The basis for this seems to be Islam's increased visibility, where the construction of new mosques and women's veiling often are mentioned as evidence, causing, for example, the Ministry of Education to ban "Muslim clothing" in institutions of higher learning—yet without really implementing such a ban—and prohibiting the performance of religious practices on university premises.<sup>35</sup> The government's efforts to curb radicalization became particularly evident through its involvement in the so-called al-Ahbash campaign in 2011, which was aimed at instilling a more "moderate" Islam among Ethiopia's Muslims.<sup>36</sup> The campaign sparked strong reactions from the Muslim community, which argued that the government was illegally interfering in their internal religious affairs and thus violating the constitutional separation of state and religion. Widespread protests during 2012 and 2013 had the effect of making Islam explicitly and publicly visible in the streets of Addis Ababa and other major cities.

## Reclaiming Space

The 1974 revolution effectively ended the hegemonic position of the EOTC and broke the ancient and close relationship the church had with the state. The changes also affected the church's political self-understanding as intrinsic to Ethiopia's national-religious narrative, wherein political power was based on the idea of divine kingship connected to the Old Testament. Deprived of its political capital, the church was forced to downplay the political-religious dimension and to maneuver in between the legacy of past glory and new political realities.

While the EOTC continued to perceive the Christian tradition as foundational to Ethiopia as a nation, its ability to adjust was also affected by a changing religious landscape—by the growing number of Protestants and by the increasingly visible nature of Islam. This has been hard to digest for many Orthodox Christians, resulting in what Dereje Feyissa (2011:9) has referred to as a "siege mentality," which entails a sense of loss, of being under attack by religious competitors, and the feeling of being denied their rightful and legitimate position.

Parallel to this, however, were forces within the EOTC that sought to break out of this siege mentality. Through rather aggressive activism, they aimed to reclaim what they viewed as “lost space.” Responding to the expansions of other religious communities, such sentiments reflect the imagined historical hegemonic position of the EOTC as being intrinsic to Ethiopian national identity. This was made explicit by a high-ranking clergyman, who during the 2022 *timket* celebrations proclaimed, “I have no objections to other religions’ right to get land and build their religious space. But, no one should aim to be equal to Orthodox Church, because none of the other religions, since their emergence in this country, contributed for the establishment and growth of Ethiopia as much as our church did.”<sup>37</sup>

The most important actor here is the Mahabere Qidusan movement (the Association of Saints), which surfaced in the late 1980s. Largely driven by university students, this movement emerged out of Sunday School programs in churches close to the Addis Ababa University campus. While the movement was initially confined to Addis Ababa, with churches such as the Medhane Alem Church and St. Mary’s Church as important centers, the Bilate camp—training young men for the war against the Eritrean liberation fronts in the late 1980s—became an important venue for the broader dissemination of Mahabere Qidusan ideas and for the expansion of the movement nationwide.<sup>38</sup>

A major aim of the Mahabere Qidusan movement has been to strengthen Orthodox identity among the younger generation, which was seen as attacked on two fronts: by the Marxist ideology of the Derg and by Protestantism. The movement ardently stressed the ancient legacy of the church and the need to conserve its doctrines and traditions, yet managed, at the same time, to clothe these in a modern frock that appealed to the younger generation. While much attention was given to upholding morale and to strengthening individual piety, there was also a strong focus on the EOTC’s significance for society and national identity. This was expressed through nostalgic notions about the church’s historical importance, through sentiments that its influence was currently being eroded, and translated into efforts to reclaim its perceived central position.

The “re” in reclaiming points to historical continuity, but it is also evident that Mahabere Qidusan, through its imagination of loss, was establishing new practices and carving out new spaces.<sup>39</sup> Important here were the restoration of churches and monasteries, and, as already mentioned, the construction of new and lavish churches. Similarly important is the more temporal reclaiming of space during celebrations of major Orthodox holidays, when, as already discussed, urban space for a limited time is completely transformed. Such reclaiming has both directly and indirectly been directed at other religious communities, and one curious expression of this has been the sweeping of the streets where the *timket* processions would take place.<sup>40</sup> While some said that this was to clean it from dirt, youth interviewed by Meron Zeleke viewed it as “an act of purifying the roads, which had been ‘contaminated’ by *mānafeqan*

[Protestants] and non-Christians throughout the year” (Meron Zeleke 2015a:80).

One particular highly visible incident of reclaiming space—in an explicit material manner—took place in January 2022. It started when a Pentecostal pastor organized a fundraising event for the victims of the war in northern Ethiopia at the Mesqel square in Addis Ababa. Protests soon emerged, and Orthodox Christians came out strongly against allowing the Pentecostals to use the square. *Mesqel* means “cross” in Amharic, and the square is named after the Orthodox *mesqel* celebration carried out there every September.<sup>41</sup> While the mayor of Addis Ababa asserted that the square was public land to be shared by all, the EOTC contested this, claiming it belonged to the church. This was repeated both on the ground and on social media, where, among others, Mehereteab Asefa, a popular Orthodox Christian preacher/activist, made this clear in a public sermon and recorded a video unequivocally stating, “*Mesqel* square is ours, it is Orthodox,” adding that other religious groups were “not allowed to use it.”<sup>42</sup> He also warned “that if the government did not respect this, it would create severe chaos.”<sup>43</sup> The controversy forced Addis Ababa’s mayor to approach the EOTC Patriarch to resolve the matter.<sup>44</sup>

Processes of reclaiming during such occasions have moreover been expressed and materialized on t-shirts worn by Orthodox Christian youth, with statements such as “We will preserve our first religion to the end,” “Ethiopia is a Christian island,” and “One Lord, one religion, one baptism.”<sup>45</sup> Such messages indicate a belief that Orthodox Christianity is the original religion of Ethiopia and assert its perceived central position in Ethiopia (Meron Zeleke 2015a:80). When the Muslims planned the Grand *Iftar* event in 2021, the EOTC issued, as already noted, a letter asking the Addis Ababa administration to prevent the celebration from happening. In the letter, the church argued that the celebration could provoke the Christians and lead to conflict.<sup>46</sup>

These developments point to the strengthening of a religious nationalism underscoring Ethiopia as a Christian nation. There are, however, different views of the practical implications of this nationalism. Most Orthodox Christians accept the religious plurality and the secular nature of Ethiopia, yet there are also those who challenge the secularist arrangement and who would like to see the reinstatement of the EOTC’s former hegemonic position. The Mahabere Qidusan remains an important actor here, but it is also an organization with internal factions, and it is similarly unclear how much political capital the movement has. While the Mahabere Qidusan had a difficult relationship with the EPDRF government, which accused the movement of being “extremist” (International Crisis Group 2016:8), the appointment of the Mahabere Qidusan-affiliated deacon and activist Daniel Kibret as an advisor to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed indicates a changing relationship. This appointment was also controversial; there are those who believe that it has not benefitted the Mahabere Qidusan movement and that Daniel Kibret has moved too close to the prime minister.

The EOTC is obviously troubled by the increasing number of Orthodox Christians who have been recruited by Protestant churches—with Protestantism perceived as a heretic faith. Much attention is given to “protecting” one’s faithful against this heresy, seen for example in the increasingly popular Facebook group, *Orthodox mels alat* (the Orthodox has response), which engages in polemic exchanges with Protestants.<sup>47</sup> Another example is the sermons delivered by the already mentioned Mehereteab Asefa, whose teaching became the basis for a popular VCD called *Jihad Waged by the Protestants* (Meron Zeleke 2015b:144).

The Orthodox Christians have also approached the Protestants more directly, when the Mahabere Qidusan movement sent a letter to the Evangelical Fellowship of Ethiopia, accusing a particular pastor of attempting to “dismantle the Orthodox Church.”<sup>48</sup> All this has resulted in the production of highly polemic literature, with both Orthodox and Protestant writers demonizing each other.<sup>49</sup>

Whereas Protestants are targeted for stealing EOTC’s members, Ethiopia’s Muslims are often perceived as having moved beyond their allocated space. The argument, as extensively discussed by Dereje Feyissa (2011), is that Ethiopia has generously hosted, accepted, and tolerated the Muslims—from the time of the Axumite *hijra* in 615—and that they should have shown gratitude toward the Orthodox community rather than disrespect. This was, at the time of the Ethiopian millennium, expressed through the Amharic saying, *itsedik biyye bazlat tenteltila kerech*, literally meaning “I carried her out of a feeling of sympathy/pity, but she stuck on,” and which signifies that after having been benevolent to the Muslims, Christians are now forced to endure an increasingly demanding Muslim population.

These attitudes toward Islam intersect with perceptions of an expanding Islamic extremism, where it is said that Christian Ethiopia is under “attacks of radical Islam” (Mengistu Gobeze & Asamenu Kasa 2008:195). Claims about rising Islamic extremism coming from Orthodox Christians have in particular been intensified by the publication of books by Abba Samuel (2007) and Ephrem Eshete (2008). More recently, Daniel Kibret gave a speech contending that Muslims have a strategic master plan to open hotels and other businesses in the Amhara region, and called on the youth to put an end to this expansion before it was too late.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, two famous journalists, Tamrat Negera and Amare Mekonnen, argued that the Grand *Iftar* event was motivated by political Islam and that it was a stepping stone toward creating an Islamic state in Ethiopia.<sup>51</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

Religious identities and belonging have become more important in today’s Ethiopia, which in turn have sharpened religious boundaries and deepened inter-religious tensions. What we have seen are conflicts related to both concrete and symbolic expansions; these processes are felt as encroachments, thus causing communities to reassert themselves. Attempts to reclaim

lost space have similarly served to assert the hegemonic position of one religious group and to contest the rights of others. Tensions are additionally related to more fundamental questions about political structures, national identity, and the meaning of Ethiopia, which in turn have produced intense controversies that include the contestation, suspicion, and the delegitimization of each other.

As noted in the introduction, it is important to acknowledge that religious conflicts often are intertwined with ethnic divisions, where religious and ethnic identities often reciprocally reinforce each other and where one or the other takes center stage, depending on the particular context. Such dynamics were evident in July 2020, during an upheaval fueled by the murder of the famous Oromo singer, Hachalu Hundessa. The level of violence was unprecedented, as mobs attacked and killed people and burned down numerous businesses and private homes, with additional people killed during the subsequent crackdown by government security forces. While the EOTC claimed that it was a religious conflict, targeting Orthodox Christians, and emphasized what it called religious extremism, research revealed that religion and ethnicity constituted mutually reinforcing factors, cementing existing boundaries (Østebø et al. 2021).<sup>52</sup>

The notion of extremism continues to be activated and amplified in conflicts such as these. This concept is not particularly useful in attempting to make sense of increasing polarization and violence, and it would be too simplistic to label highly complex issues as extremism. What is clear, though, is that narratives about extremism are important, and that such narratives are actively used by actors from the various communities to make sense of the violence, while they also use it as a tool for religious “othering.”

At the moment, Ethiopia is a country in flux. Having gone through multiple serious conflicts, the state has failed to protect its citizens against violent attacks and to hold perpetrators accountable. It is also safe to say that the recent and ongoing conflicts—particularly the one in Tigray—will leave deep scars that will take a very long time to heal. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s use of religious rhetoric has legitimized religious discourses in the public and brought religion to the fore, both as a marker of identity and in the demarcation of boundaries. His emphasis on peace and unity—through his concept of *medemer*—has, however, been contradicted by recurrent conflicts and accelerating violence. There is the potential to alleviate and hinder inter-religious conflicts, depending on the actors’ willingness and ability to communicate across religious boundaries. Failure to make such efforts could produce gulfs that would be very hard to bridge and which would seriously affect the subscription to shared values, the well-being of society, and the accommodation of plurality.

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## Notes

1. The reported numbers of churches burned ranged from 7 to 10 and the number of priests killed from 7 to 15 (see Østebø et al. 2021:13).
2. "Attorney General Office Says Investigations into August Jijiga Violence Complete, Reveals Discovery of Mass Grave." *Addis Standard*, 2019. <https://addisstandard.com/news-attorney-generals-office-says-investigations-into-august-jijiga-violence-complete-reveals-discovery-of-mass-grave/> (accessed November 29, 2020).
3. "UN rights chief denounces Christian-Muslim violence in Ethiopia." *Al Jazeera*, May 7, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/7/un-decries-shocking-christian-muslim-clashes-in-ethiopia> (accessed, May 19, 2022).
4. For example, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) defines extremism as "a concept used to describe religious, social or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of belief systems more broadly accepted in society." *The Anti-Defamation League*, <https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/extremism> (accessed October 14, 2022).
5. The *tabot* is a replica of the Ark of the Covenant, which is found in every Orthodox church.
6. The only exception was during larger religious holidays, which often were "folklorized" as celebrations of pluralism.
7. Endris Mekonnen, "Proclamation Finally Decrees Equality for Ethiopian Muslims." *Ethiopian Insight*, September 16, 2020. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/09/16/proclamation-finally-decrees-equality-for-ethiopian-muslims/> (accessed June 1, 2021).
8. Posted on PM Abiy Ahmed's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/112704996810839/posts/520239812724020/> (accessed May 20, 2021).
9. René Lefort, "Mind over Matter: Abiy Ahmed's Aim to 'Pentecostalize Ethiopian Politics.'" *Ethiopian Insight*, December 24, 2020. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/24/mind-over-matter-abiy-ahmeds-aim-to-pentecostalize-ethiopian-politics/> (accessed January 23, 2022).
10. "Pente" is the Ethiopian colloquial term used for a Pentecostal Christian.
11. Instead of using the typical Amharic word for God, *Egzabiher*—which is only used by Christians—the word of his choice is *Fetari* (creator), one that speaks to all religious communities.

12. “Ethiopia: Dr. Abiy Ahmed’s Speech at Reconciliation Conference of the Orthodox Church.” *YouTube*, July 26, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRgyENI8HQU> (accessed February 10, 2022).
13. *Iftar* is the meal breaking the fast after sunset during Ramadan.
14. “Ethiopian Muslims Break World Record for Hosting Largest Iftar Gathering.” *The Nation*, May 12, 2021. <https://nation.com.pk/12-May-2021/ethiopian-muslims-break-world-record-for-hosting-largest-iftar-gathering> (accessed May 20, 2021).
15. The *matab* is a cord worn around the neck indicating baptism.
16. The *kofiya* is the—often white—skullcap; the *thawb* is a white robe, commonly worn in the Gulf States. The *hijab* is the veil covering a woman’s hair, and the *niqab* covers a woman’s face.
17. Interview, Addis Ababa, October 20, 2013.
18. Bileh Jelani, “News Analysis: Muslim Clerics Demand Accountability after Security Crackdown of Planned ‘Grand Iftar’; Deputy Mayor Apologizes.” *Addis Standard*, May 10, 2021. <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-muslim-clerics-demand-accountability-after-security-crackdown-on-participants-of-planned-grand-iftar-deputy-mayor-apologizes/> (accessed May 20, 2021).
19. *Ibid.* See his Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/ahmedinjebel99> (accessed May 28, 2021).
20. Bileh Jelani, “News: ‘Grand Ethiopian Street Iftar 2021’ Event to be held Today, Muslim Clerics Praise Efforts by City Administration.” *Addis Standard*, May 11, 2021. <https://addisstandard.com/news-grand-ethiopian-street-iftar-2021-organizers-announce-event-to-be-held-today-muslim-clerics-praise-efforts-by-city-administration/> (accessed May 20, 2021).
21. See for example: “Ethiopia: Hundreds of Muslims burn down church.” December 16, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX9gILYFLkg> (accessed May 27, 2021).
22. For details about the continuing controversy about mosques in Axum, see Hana Zeratsyon, “Ethiopia Mosque Ban: ‘Our Sacred City of Aksum needs to be Protected.’” *BBC Tigrinya*, June 24, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48634427> (accessed May 28, 2021).
23. Interview, Addis Ababa, October 19, 2006. For an overview over similar clashes and conflicts, see Assefa Tolera (2017: 49ff).
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25. Interview, Mota, October 12, 2020; The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council. የኢትዮጵያ እስልምና ጉዳዮች ጠቅላይ ምክር ቤት, በጦጦ ከተማ ሙስሊም ማህበረሰብ ላይ የተፈፀመውን የሽብር ጥቃት አጣሪ ሉዑክ ቡድን የገዙ ሪፖርት፤ ታህሳስ፤ 2012 ዓ.ል፤ አዲስ አበባ፤ ኢትዮጵያ. (Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council. *Report of the journey by the delegated investigative team on the terror attack inflicted upon the Muslim community in Mota*. Addis Ababa, December/January 2019/20). It needs to be added that no independent investigations have been made public.
26. Jeffrey Cimmino, “‘They will Murder you’: Churches Burned and Worshipers Killed in Ethiopia’s Ethnic Carnage.” *Washington Examiner*, September 21, 2019. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/ethnic-violence-in-ethiopia-leaves-churches-burned-and-worshippers-killed> (March 10, 2020).
27. Fieldnotes, October 12, 2020.

28. Interview, Addis Ababa, June 1, 2022; “Ethiopia: 21 Muslims Killed in “Planned Massacre” in Gonder.” *The Siasat Daily*, April 27, 2022. <https://www.siasat.com/ethiopia-21-muslims-killed-in-planned-massacre-in-gonder-2316831/> (accessed May 21, 2022).
29. “News: Amhara State Security Arrest 373 on Suspicion of Involvement in Attacks in Gonder: Movements of People, Weapons Restricted after 7pm.” *Addis Standard*, April 29, 2022. <https://addisstandard.com/news-amhara-state-security-arrest-373-on-suspicion-involvement-in-recent-attack-on-muslims-in-gonder-movement-restrictions-placed-after-7-pm/> (accessed May 21, 2022).
30. Interview, Addis Ababa, October 19, 2006. There are, however, many conflicting stories accounting for what actually happened.
31. Interview, Harar, February 13, 2020; interview, Dirre Dawa, February 10, 2020; interview, Addis Ababa, January 22, 2020.
32. “Oromia Police shot dead two, injure several others at Timket festival over flag controversy.” *Addis Standard*, January 22, 2022. <https://addisstandard.com/news-oromia-police-shot-dead-two-injure-several-others-at-timket-festival-over-flag-controversy/> (accessed January 28, 2022).
33. Such attitudes reflect a protective conservatism found within Salafism in general (Commins 2006:33ff, 46ff).
34. This can be in the form of pictures with religious motives or other religious objects.
35. Ministry of Education, *Rules and Regulations on Religious Practices in Educational Institutions* (May 2007); Ministry of Education: *How to Prevent and Solve Religious Challenges that Occur in Educational Institutions* (November 2007).
36. Officially called the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP), al-Ahbash is a Lebanese organization devoted to combat any form of “extremist” Islam, and views itself as the leading force for moderation (*al-itidal*). For more details, see Østebø (2013a, 2013b).
37. “The Priest’s Speech that Shocked Abiy Ahmed and Adanech Abebe,” *YouTube*, January 18, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmkbW6kT-wE> (accessed January 29, 2022).
38. Interview, Addis Ababa, October 17, 2013; interview, Addis Ababa, October 23, 2013.
39. This obviously relates to the notion of “inventing traditions” (Ranger & Hobsbawm 1983), and it is important to emphasize that this also has relevance for Muslims and Protestants in asserting their Ethiopian indigeneity.
40. A key aspect of the *timket* celebration is when the *tabot* (replica of the Ark of the Covenant, found in every Orthodox church) is taken out and carried in processions to a designated place, where it will stay overnight.
41. During the Derg period, the name was changed to Abyiot (Revolution square).
42. “The Mesqel square and the Orthodox Storm: Current Issue.” *YouTube*, February 6, 2022 (accessed February 12, 2022).
43. Posted on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/100006317976767/posts/3017239355163301/> (accessed February 12, 2022).
44. Posted on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/AdanechAbiebie/status/1490367081463881739?t=zov3ImHoEFEMdGVsbrfmLQ&s=0> 8 (accessed February 12, 2022).
45. The phrase refers to an Ethiopian empire isolated and threatened by external forces that are antagonistic toward the Christian tradition.

46. A facsimile of the letter is available here: <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-muslim-clerics-demand-accountability-after-security-crackdown-on-participants-of-planned-grand-iftar-deputy-mayor-apologizes/> (accessed May 28, 2021).
47. See: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ORTHODOX.MELS.ALAT> (the group has over 64,000 members. The name of the Facebook group is a clear reference to a book with the same title published by the above-mentioned Daniel Kibret in 2011.
48. US Department of State. *International Religious Freedom Report 2004: Ethiopia*. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2004/35355.htm> (accessed May 27, 2021).
49. See Assefa Tolera (2017: 44) for an overview of this.
50. “Daniel Kibret, “Akrari Islmna wuhabiyoch.” *YouTube*, December 29, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvgrirApR74&t=13s> (accessed January 5, 2021). It is important to note that Daniel Kibret has become an increasingly controversial figure, and that he does not speak for the whole Mahabere Qidusan.
51. See “The Endgame of our Religious Politics,” *YouTube*, May 14, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4FMpXkKFzQ&t=29s> (accessed May 28, 2021).
52. Medihane Ekubamichael. “Ethiopian Orthodox Church Releases Grim Report on Recent Attacks on Parishioners.” *Addis Standard*, August 26, 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/news-ethiopian-orthodox-tewahedo-church-releases-grim-report-on-recent-attacks-on-parishioners/> (accessed December 2, 2020).