

# BOOK REVIEW

**Terje Østebø. *Islam, Ethnicity and Conflict in Ethiopia: The Bale Insurgency, 1963–1970*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xii + 363 pp. List of Maps. List of Figures. List of Tables. Glossary. References. Index. \$120.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-108-83968-6.

The Horn of Africa has been a hotbed of conflict for the last six decades; it leads continental records and has distinctive qualitative features involving sovereignty and territoriality. Overwhelmed by the intricacies involved in engaging the complex issues informing conflicts in Africa, several studies have examined the causes and manifestations through the usual traditional lenses: competition over resources, political marginalization, the sway of the natural environment, rapid population growth, or even expressions of “ancient ethnic hatred.” The conflicts in the Horn depart from other continental experiences because their issues and root causes are historically interwoven, reproducing themselves over space and time, so much so that one historian persuasively elucidates “genealogies of the conflicts” going as far back as the beginning of the nineteenth century (Richard Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in Northeast Africa: Genealogies of Conflict Since 1800* [Oxford University Press, 2011]; see also John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* [James Currey, 2011]) The latest brilliant rendition draws on three case studies from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan, injects convincing units of analysis—governments’ management of conflicts, the dynamic role of “influential individuals,” and the dynamism of interstate relations—into the subject (Tsega Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa: Politics and Violence in Darfur, Oromia, and the Tana Delta* [Palgrave Macmillan, 2019]). Rarely has a single work until now juxtaposed religion and ethnicity, especially in the case of Ethiopia, to present a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the conflicts in the Horn.

Drawing on an insurgency in the overwhelmingly Arsii Oromo province of Bale, Terje Østebø’s *Islam, Ethnicity and Conflict in Ethiopia* defies a single-factor analysis of the conflicts. In this work, Østebø attempts to unravel the connections between religion and ethnicity, elucidating the significance of religion in studying Ethiopia, and by so doing presents an innovative theoretical framework for a broader understanding. Building on the existing body

of knowledge, Østebø reinvents the concept of “peoplehood” as a conceptual tool useful for understanding the role of ethnicity and religion. He identifies two distinct categories of peoplehood—*Islaama* and Amhara. These two categories, rather than simply referring to two ethnic groups, reveal “the complex intertwined intersection of religion and ethnicity—as two tightly woven and mutually reinforcing dimensions in the making of a particular peoplehood” (218). “*Islaama* peoplehood,” Østebø contends, “points to the simultaneity of religion and ethnicity and reveals how the ethnic and religious dimensions reinforce each other as foundational for peoplehood” (54). Amhara peoplehood, like *Islaama*, represent the interlocked overlap of religion and ethnicity, “...embodied in the *beteseb* and in the hierarchy of local clergy, as well as emplaced in homes, hamlets and in parish churches ... merging ethnicity and religion in a way that produced a sense of belonging that was locally anchored...” (218). This is a substantive analytical conceptualization and can possibly be applied to historical dynamics of a certain temporal scope. The critical problem of this brave conceptualization, especially in the case of Arsii Oromo, is that it is not an analytical tool that can be applied to all historical times; its ability to capture and examine the key developments visibly subsides as the temporal scope of the book comes closer to the present time.


The Bale insurgency of 1963–70 itself is discussed in Chapters Four and Five, shedding new light on its immediate causes, the struggle in lowland Bale, and the insurgency’s organizational structure. Although Østebø’s *Islam, Ethnicity and Conflict in Ethiopia* draws much inspiration from Gebru Tareke (*Ethiopia: Power and Protest, Peasant Rebellion in the Twentieth Century* [Cambridge University Press, 1991]), Østebø rejects Tareke’s conceptualization of the Bale insurgency as a “peasant rebellion.” His reading of the land tenure system asks new questions about the significance of land alienation. It examines “land-clan connections” by situating the Bale insurgency in a broader spatial and temporal context, emphasizing the *longue durée* approach to theorizing Ethiopia’s religious divides. Instead of subordinating religion to “ethnic boundaries” and “political developments,” Østebø pushes for recognition of religion as vital in producing political narratives, distinct identities, and the perception of “self” and “other.”

While recognizing the Bale insurgency’s distinct causes and trajectories, Østebø rightly argues that a complete understanding can only be achieved by appreciating the intersections with broader regional currents navigating across the Horn of Africa. Drawing on historical data relevant to insurgencies in the larger region as illustrations of the ideas of “Muslim unity” connecting multiple ethnic groups, Østebø attempts to demonstrate the role of Islam as a weapon of political mobilization and as a tool that provides an everyday inspiration that ultimately enabled common “peoplehood” which transcended local limits.

This book is a powerful addition to the discussions in Oromo-Ethiopia studies, conflict, ethnic, and religious studies, and ethnonationalism in the Horn of Africa. Nevertheless, Østebø’s work is not without weaknesses.

Although the work draws its case study from a largely Oromo province—and a reasonable attempt to analyze the insurgency’s connection to the broader Oromo nationalism—it cannot demonstrate competent awareness when it comes to Oromo studies. A considerable amount of literature produced a fascinating body of knowledge about the Bale insurgency much earlier than Østebø’s work.

This book’s analytical nuances and adept presentation of historical dynamics, the significance of its interpretation of causes and meanings of conflicts, and its attention to the combined effects of ethnicity and religion make it necessary reading for scholars of Oromo-Ethiopia studies, other Africanists, and policymakers. It is also a recommended reading for graduate students of the humanities and social sciences.

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