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FROM BELEAGUERED FORTRESSES TO BELLIGERENT CITIES

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The mainstream and until recently unchallenged view of the history of Christian-Muslim relations in the Horn of Africa has depended on a simplistic narrative stating that the Christian Kingdom that ruled the Ethiopian Highlands claiming its legitimacy as heir to the ancient Aksumite civilization has long stood as a "beleaguered Christian fortress in the midst of a sea of Islam", eternally surrounded by prowling Muslim enemies, as King Haile Selassie once put it in a speech before the United States Congress (Markakis, 2003: 2).[1] Ethiopian contacts with Western European nations since the late medieval period have been recurrently interpreted on the basis of this grounding divisive ideological discourse in which Christian rulers were regularly depicted (and actually frequently depicted themselves) as needing allies in European powers in a millenary religious war, defensively perched in the natural bastion of the mountainous Ethiopian Highlands. This long narrative thread is strongly defining in the political historiography of Ethiopia and its regional relations and one that has tended to legitimize aggressive action by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians against the bordering Muslim sultanates and, after the late nineteenth century Southern expansion under King Menelik II, against Ethiopia's Muslim populations. It is also enmeshed in the more recent "containment policies" that the Ethiopian government has been following regionally (Desplat and Østebø, 2012, 16; see also Erlich, 2012, and Hansen, 2012, in the same volume).

So popularized is this historiographic view that, in international relations speak, the geo-strategic configurations of the Horn of Africa and Middle East generally revolve around this divide to produce functional interpretations of Ethiopian diplomatic and military involvement in regional affairs and even beyond. From the Thewodros crusading offers to Imperial Britain to the Korean war and, more recently, symbolic participation in the US-led coalitions in the first and second Iraqi wars, Ethiopia's alignment with Western powers is inspired by and interpreted in the Christian alliance paradigm or, we could say, the enduring mirror effect of the Prester John myth (James, 1990: 34-36). But these long-accepted assumptions about the view of the "beleaguered Christian fortress" have been progressively challenged by recent historiography (Hussein, 1992; 2000; Carmichael, 1996; Braukämper, 2002; Markakis, 2003) and by a string of sociological, anthropological and political studies on Christian–Muslim relations in Ethiopia (Abbink, 1998; Fiquet, 2007; Desplat and Østebø, 2012; among others).

[1] Actually quoting J. S. Trimingham's remark (1969: 21); see also Owens (2008:1).

In 2008, following the lead of the late Ahmed Hussein (1992: 15), Travis Owens, a graduate from the Monterey Naval Post-Graduate School, produced a little known and little quoted thesis (Owens, 2008). It convincingly reinterpreted historical relations between the Medieval Christian Kingdom and the Ifat and Wollo sultanates as one of continued Christian aggression and expansion against what he calls the "beleaguered Muslim fortresses" to the southeast of the Ethiopian space. He thus reviewed the groundings for the 16th century Adalite Jihad led by the famous (or notorious, in Christian views) Imam Mohammed ibn Ibrahim (nicknamed Ahmed Gragn, or the left-handed, by Amharic speakers). The undeniable virtue of Owens' (and for that matter Hussein's) stance is that it definitely muddies the waters of ideological legitimacy on which the international image of Ethiopia has tended to be based for centuries. Not only are Muslims endogenous to Ethiopia, despite the ingrained Christian describer "Muslims in Ethiopia" rather than "Ethiopian Muslims" (mostly Hussein's contribution; see also: Østebø, 2008b), but the Christian-controlled rulers have also historically acted predatorily and aggressively against Muslim city-states (Owens' own argument).[2] It would be unfortunate not to consider these findings as a positive contribution in a major historiographic revision in the context of Horn Studies.

A further crack in the traditional view of Ethiopia's monolithic image has been the uneasy acknowledgement that demographic portraits of the Ethiopian population's religious allegiances show that the growth of Islam followers has been continuous, matched by a constant decline of Christian Monophisite Orthodoxy. Quoting the 2007 Ethiopian Population Census Commission, the latest PEW Report on *Mapping the Global Muslim Population* (PEW, 2009) acknowledges that followers of Islam have grown in the last decade to 33,9 per cent of the total population, in fact almost equalling the Orthodox Christians (40 per cent). Less conservative statistics point to a Muslim 45-50 per cent majority, against an Orthodox 35-40 per cent (Nationmaster.com, 2013). Notwithstanding the many complaints regarding possible (even probable) religious and ethnic statistical underrepresentation coming from various sides,[3] the fact of the matter is that the overall ideological image of a Christian Ethiopia is not presently matched by demography – and formally at least in constitutional terms since the fall of the last monarch, King Haile Selassie, in 1974. One should not of course be tempted to read Ethiopian religious statistics from a strictly dualistic perspective. In practice, the decline of Orthodoxy is inversely paralleled with the growth of the so-called the *P'ent'ayoch*, the followers of the Pentecostal Protestant Churches in the south and even the northern part of the country. similarly, Ethiopian Muslims, traditionally followers of Sufism, are growingly embracing a variety of Sunni reformist trends (on the relationship between these and ethnicity, see Østebø, 2008a: 435 seq.), a phenomenon directly related to the changes brought about by the DERG's

[2] Medieval urban history in Ethiopia is intimately connected with Muslim trade. Later, Muslim settlers are a founding community of the first post-Aksumite Christian capital: Gondar. Local Muslim oral traditions even indicate that their present there predates Fasiladas' "founding" of the city in the mid-seventeenth-century. And when Ali I, the Muslim Oromo ruler of the Yejju dinasty, from Begemder, took control of the kingdom after Ras Sehul Mikael's death, in 1779, he was interested in controlling the kingdom's political centre, not in re-establishing an independent Muslim sultanate.

[3] See Jimma Times (2008), EOTC (2009).

fall, and the official acceptance of religious freedom by the EPRDF since 1991. However, after the 1995/6 Muslim demonstrations and the more recent government adoption of "war against terrorism" rhetoric (Derej Feyissa, 2012: 27), we can say that this containment policy that inspires its regional foreign affairs has progressively spilt inwards. But in societal terms, the recent flowering of Muslim reformism cannot and should not be extricated from the massive urbanization process that is hitting Ethiopia. In the last ten years most cities have seen their population more than double and Addis Ababa has grown at an annual rate of 4 per cent, now being one of the ten largest cities in Sub-Saharan Africa, expected to reach 8 million before 2020 according to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP, 2013).

Although we could be left wondering to what extent the ethno-federalist drive that has been reshaping the political and administrative outlook of the nation has reinforced ancient internal ethno-religious cracks, and even speculate about any future possible secessionist and radicalizing effects (ICG, 2012; Østebø, 2012: 254), these destabilising factors are overshadowed by those revealing a major reconfiguration of Ethiopian urban life, and the growing tensions that mark the public – and noisy – coming out of urban Islam. On the one hand, an understanding of this coming out requires addressing both the power shifts within the Muslim community and the various modes of Christian reactions to it, and on the other, a look into the sinuous internal containment policies of federal and local authorities.

A Wahhabi spring?

Against the framework of a long-consolidated nation-state – an obvious exception in the Horn region – reconfigured by a recently engineered and largely experimental, ethno-federalist and quasi-authoritarian regime (Aaron Tesfaye, 2002; ICG, 2009; Clapham, 2002: 25 seq.; McGeachie, 2010: 33) -, Ethiopians are being faced with sweeping changes, both in terms of their millenary agrarian economy and the physical and mental reconstruction of their urban settlements. The Muslim reformist trend draws its strength from the obviousness of the limitations of a religious and ritual system anchored in pre-modern rural and urban traditions. But, as it makes its way in the public sphere, it raises fears that the community may fall prey to a polarizing fundamentalist discourse that opens the door to unstoppable internal tensions and becomes a harbinger of centripetal conflict that will unbalance the fragile status quo of regional balance in the Horn of Africa. This fear seems to be running deep among Ethiopian and international political commentators, advisors and scientists. This line of reasoning, which flows from a deeply ingrained comparative and functional perspective concerning political Islam after 9/11, may help understand the antagonising position and repressive actions of the government towards Muslim reformists, but not the spread of reformism itself and more generally the growth of religion allegiances in cities nationwide. Thus, as it is so much in line with the official position, the danger is that it will have a legitimizing effect instead of an explanatory power.

This article examines a series of recent conflicts in Ethiopian urban politics relating to the federal government's handling of Islamic claims and demands for public freedom of worship, in order to gauge the adequacy of such fears. The interview-based fieldwork was mainly carried out in three Ethiopian urban areas: the capital, Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar and Gondar, Northern Ethiopia, from March to May 2012 and in March 2013. Additionally, research was also carried out in Lebanon in May and June 2012. Formal and informal interviews were conducted with a wide range of stakeholders from different walks of life and varying religious and political perspectives, from government party cardholders to opposition-prone militants and non-politicized citizens, of multiple religious and sectarian adherences and representing all age groups, from young adults to *Shimageloch* ("elders"). Local, regional and federal government officials and public servants were interviewed, as were journalists, university students and academics, Christian and Muslim scholars, representatives from long-established urban families and first-generation migrants from rural areas.[4] The following is an abridged compilation of data collected over the past two years but partly underpinned by pre-existent connections and network access from previous fieldwork missions over the past decade.

As mentioned above, an important issue underlying the ideological dynamics of national identity in Ethiopia today is the handling of a major demographic shift in religious representation and of the political reframing of the status quo in the Muslim community in order to accommodate answers to the troubling question: "Are Muslims becoming a majority in Ethiopia?". 2030 is waved in forecasting studies as a possible date for this momentous statistical event, Ethiopia being one of the countries with the fastest growing population (PEW, 2011). Concurrently, most respondents, both Muslim and Christian, agree that there is a generalized perception in Ethiopia that the growth of the Muslim population has been sustained and continuous, and that it is directly associated with various signs of Muslim public assertiveness, e.g. the current mosque vs. church building competition in all major cities, the wearing of marking visual attire (the *taqiyah* and the *hijab*), claims to use of public festive venues, mounting quarter segregation and multiple neighbourhood frictions in mixed *kebeles*, etc.

"They have more wives, they breed more than we do"; "We'll soon become a minority in our own country and the government is doing nothing about it". These are recurring statements among Amhara Christians when referring to Muslims. Although less studied than the Muslim dynamics in the South of the country and the Wollo region, the importance of the Islamic rise in the northern cities (Gondar and Bahir Dar in the Amhara region and also in Tigray: Mekele, Adigrat and Adwa in particular) should not be ignored. In Gondar, for instance, grievances towards Muslims' intent to occupy Christian festive venues (such as Meskel Square near the Medical College on the route to Azazo) highlight a progressive alienation

[4] An almost inevitable bias must be admitted since gender balance was difficult to achieve in many instances, particularly due to etiquette limitations in more traditional family groups. Additionally, regular surveys were carried out in internet news aggregators, the blogosphere and the expanding digital social media from inside the country and in the diaspora, where freedom of expression is less limited and where political and religious views tend to be more emphatically vented.

between the two communities. In the Arada area, typically a mixed quarter to the east of the city Castles complex (the *ghebi*), long-established Christian families talk of moving out as hitherto peaceful relations become estranged by mutual suspicion and signs of enmity. Breaking with an old tradition, today Muslim neighbours seldom participate in the traditional coffee ceremony in front of Christian families' homes at the end of *Lideta Maryam* ("birth of Saint Mary"). Although being clearly identified as a major Christian centre (a former capital of the Abyssinian kingdom and an historically important theological centre), Gondar's Muslims have been there since the city's foundation in the mid-seventeenth century (or even before; see footnote 2). The mosques built during the Italian period have consolidated Muslim theological studies there since the thirties and it was from here that the main Salafi reform movement spread to Addis Ababa in the late 1990s (Østebø, 2008a: 422).

Most respondents agree that Muslims seem to be one of the communities more clearly profiting from the present neo-liberal setting in which Ethiopia seems progressively immersed.

- They give abundant examples of thriving Muslim business companies. Muslim banking is seen as playing an important role in promoting prominent Muslim families' business ventures, such as infrastructural (mainly building), agricultural or commercial (import-export, commodities, end consumer, etc).
- The overshadowing figure of the investor Mohammed Hussein Al Amoudi, tagged as one of Africa's richest men,[5] and whose deep and enigmatic ties with the ruling federal party EPRDF seem unshaken by the recent waves of Islamic protest, serves as inspiration and is talked about as an important beacon. He is regarded as helping to channel financing and entrepreneurship within the Muslim upper classes, but also attracts suspicion and endless gossip, especially among Christians, because of his Saudi ties and unverified hidden agendas in the militant spread of Islam in Ethiopia. His philanthropic ventures are an important source of rumours among Christians who are not supporters of the EPRDF.

It is difficult to gauge the reality and sustainability of the double-digit economic growth that Ethiopia is experiencing today and that official propaganda acclaims as a major achievement of the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's governing action, though this is not the place to discuss it. But we cannot help connecting this economic drive with the radical reshaping of the agrarian economy that took off in 2009 (Lefort, 2010), the speed of rural-city migration processes (with Addis Ababa being one of the fastest growing cities in the world today, UNEP, 2013), visible in the current urban sprawl that is dotting Ethiopia, and tentative industrialization. Above all there is the feverish infrastructural development taking place everywhere in the country – the building and rebuilding roads and urban motorways and the housing spree -, a national push whose epitome is the Renaissance Dam, a megalomaniac government programme to

[5] Al Amoudi's wealth has been recorded in the *Forbes* billionaire list since 2002, ranking him as the richest person in Ethiopia and the second richest Saudi Arabian citizen. As of March 2013, *Forbes* ranked Al Amoudi as the second richest African person in the world (Forbes, 2013).

tame the upper-Nile waters and supposedly bring an unprecedented bonanza to the region's energy sector.[6] The flip-side of the coin is less shiny, though, and tends to be hushed up in the official discourse: massive displacement of whole urban neighbourhoods to give way to high-rises, malls, hotels, gated communities, etc; mass emigration to the Gulf states and beyond, profound changes in peoples' daily routines and family solidarities, with accompanying loss of traditional cultural anchors under the pressure to copy American leisure dreams, Gulf-style housing paradigms, and Asian entrepreneurship practices, early steps in automotive democratization that sucks peoples' meagre finances dry and exerts a terrible public health toll on urbanites and, not least, escapist forms of return to religion.[7]

It is in this very dynamic scenario that communal and religious identities are being shaken, reconfigured and reaffirmed. Particularly in the Muslim community, attendance at Friday prayers in the expanding network of mosques and participation in religious discussion groups (at Mosques, Islamic schools and charitable institutions and in the ever expanding regular afternoon *t'chat* sessions) has reached an all-time high in living memory. Muslim prayers in public places such as in university campuses have actually become an important ground for anti-governmental protest in the guise of claims to freedom of worship at Addis Ababa University (AAU) and elsewhere.

Older respondents establish a curious parallel between this intellectual militancy of Muslim university youth and the utopian enthusiasm with which students embraced Marxist-Leninist ideological and terminological discussions on the AAU campus in the early 1970s. This youthful Muslim awakening is read against the background of a long intellectual lull caused by the tragic interregnum of the Red Terror period and its aftermath, which was the period of transfer of power to the EPRDF's ethnic federalism programme (or as many oppositionists say the divide & rule strategy of the TPLF's predatory national project), and as an identitarian reaction to the present government's neo-liberal economic policies. This is added to the spread of materialist aspirations associated with the so-called "American Dream", which is funnelled through televized Ethiopian soap operas, Fox TV series and success stories from the returning US diasporas (a trend that was stressed in the much-propagandized New Ethiopian Millennium commemorations in 2007-2008). But there is another aspect to this tidal turn, one that is not so readily acknowledged. Although the discursive nature of young Muslims' claims to a return to the letter of the Koran and Islamic ethical purity and their emphatic aspirations to embrace the wider, borderless Muslim community seem rather shallow and not particularly imaginative, they seem to be engaging in a hidden dialogue with the older Muslim generations. The supposed "return to the letter of the Koran" actually hides a mainly urban and literate modernizing cry with revolutionary undertones against traditional Ethiopian Islam, one deeply immersed in orality, the worship of Muslim saints and the wider substrate of "factual

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[6] Since Ethiopian rivers amount to 70 per cent of the total Nile caudal, also forecasted is a major power shift in Ethio-Sudanese and Ethio-Egypian relations, as regional hydropolitics tend to abide to the rule that upstream countries hold the upper hand when they manage control of water flows.

[7] Pilgrimages to holy sites have taken off with renewed fervour and stories of miraculous cures by holy water (both Christian and Muslim) are widely popularized, as are mentions of apparitions of Saint Mary.

beliefs" that has for centuries pieced together a pan-Ethiopian and trans-religious mental worldview based on a common sacrificial semantic, the ever popular holy water cult and ancient inner family and communal rituals.[8] As elsewhere in the Muslim world, an inter-generational standoff is being posited via apparently paradoxical social modernization claims based on a purifying return to the roots of Islam.

Furthermore, a growing part of Muslim youth that is attracted to the cities in growing numbers is now attending universities and polytechnics (which have grown more than tenfold in the last five years), where they are being compelled to participate in a major debate today: are Ethiopian Islamic traditions truly Islamic? As seen through the condescending eyes of Arab theologians and Islamic scholars, the Sufist strains of Ethiopian Islam are little less than heathen and paganist (*kafir*: "infidel"). In the interviews conducted in Beirut, with Sunnis, Shi'ite of Al-Ahbash representatives and university researchers and scholars, all proved to have only second-hand, stereotyped knowledge of Ethiopian Muslims. The oral-based familiarity with the *hadiths*, non-compliance with Islamic law (*Shari'ah*), sacrificial practices, *Awliya*-based worship,[9] and suspected shallowness of theological knowledge and debate, were quoted as proof of the little credit Ethiopian Muslims receive outside. This derogatory view is curiously evocative of a long history of Western Christian argumentation against the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Orthodox rabbinical dismissals of the Jewishness of Ethiopian *Falasha* immigrants brought into Israel in the mid-1980s (Bard, 2002: 183-4).

Mustafa Kabha and Haggai Erlich (2006) have pointed out that from the mid-1950s, Salafi-prone polemists have surfaced in Southeast Ethiopia (mainly in Harar) and have been able to make an imprint, if not for any other reason, at least because they fostered a theological discussion and caused a Sufi reaction that acknowledged the need for argumentation, thereby diversifying and opening up Ethiopian Islam. Further occurrences of Salafist activity are recorded in the rural areas of Bale region in the early 1970s. Terje Østebø (2011), discussing a conflict that broke out about revenues from local Sufi shrines, mentions that a Salafist *shaykh*, Abubakr Muhammed, went as far as to declare the *Awliya* dead, while calling for a return to "true" Islam and denouncing Sufist practices and views as deviationist (Østebø, 2011: 628-9). Hussein Ahmed (2000), Jan Abbink (2007; 2008) and Eloi Fiquet (2007), among others, have preferred to focus on Wollo rural Muslim communities – a region where historically tolerance and transitivity between Christians and Muslims seems to have been the rule. Here again the issues of oral vs. written authority, along with popular conservatives vs. elite reformers, claim an important foothold (Abbink, 2007: 73-4).

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[8] It is undeniable that Christian-Muslim cooperation and tolerance rhetoric hide a harsh, asymmetrical political and sociological reality that has contributed to the Muslims' feelings of historically being treated as second-class citizens (Clapham, 1975: 77-78; Østebø, 2008a: 434) and that meat sacrifice is a major distinctive feature between Christians and Muslims (Fiquet, 2007), but it is at this symbolic level that the endogenousness of Ethiopian Islam is clearer.

[9] Plural of *wali*: "Sufi saint".

But even if well documented and increasingly studied, the friction between reformists (Salafi, *Tabligh*, and now more specifically Wahhabi (see Østebø, 2008a; Desplat and Østebø, 2012) vs. Sufi traditionalists raging in urban areas today (not least in the capital Addis Ababa) have been insufficiently considered in connection with the above-mentioned demographic, economic and social reconfigurations under way in Ethiopian cities. This is not so much (or at least not only) a theological issue but an effective political move to claim physical space (over control of mosques, schools and monetary flows) and ideological allegiance inside the growing Muslim community.

Although this may be contested, our younger *Wahhabi* respondents do not see their involvement in the religious affairs of the community as impacting on their normal social life, work or study, or even at home. Many, especially at university, keep their Christian friends from high school and neighbourhood times. They acknowledge that there are radicalized fringes in their midst, who generally do not receive much attention from the religious authorities or much credit from their peers. They feel aggrieved and insulted that the government plays with Christian fears[10] and traditionalists' defensiveness, when placing them with international political Islamists and suggesting phantom ties with Al-Qeida type terrorists. But, although they tend to be careful when talking about their differences from their parents' views of Islam, and even if they follow their families' sacrificial practices at home, it is easy to sense disdain for or at least distancing from Sufism. As frequently happens with younger *Pentes*'s rapport with the Bible, they have acquired a taste for reading the Koran, are intensive followers of doctrinal discussions on the internet and use the information thus acquired to make their point in their theological arguments. Still, it would be too simplistic to look at the type of Sufi discourse practised in Harari or Addis Ababa as "traditional", since the degree of their connectedness and world-wisdom must not be undervalued. We attended quite a few *t'chat* sessions where Sufism was debated and welcomed as a fall-back from the negative impacts of modern city life. When we hear such comments made by bankers, doctors or scholars returning from migratory stints in the US, we can be confident that they are more probably about "reinventing" a tradition, than following it (in Hobsbawm's sense). Publicly adhering to home-grown Ethiopian Sufism has little to do with traditional practices. As much as Wahhabism, it has become for many an identitarian marker of distinction (generational, "ethnic" or class-based).

Gondar and Bahir Dar mostly being populated by self-defined Amhara. "Ethnicist" rifts are less apparent than religious ones here (even if Muslims tend either to be seen as coming from Harar in the 16th century, Wollo at the end of the 19th century or Eritrea and Tigray during the Italian period). In the melting pot of Addis Ababa, they are mingled together in processes of individual and collective identitarian legitimization. A Merkato Gurage tends to be *Tabligh*, a Harari Sufi, or an Oromo Salafi (when not Pentecostal). A youngster will prefer Wahhabism to Sufism. Being Muslim, or a true Muslim, is easily banded together with not being Tigrynian or Amhara, even if this classificatory practice collides with claims

[10] Notably among Tigrinyans, by spreading the idea that they may be massacred if EPRDF looses power.

of an ancient historical presence of Muslims in these regions. In terms of party politics, religious and ethnic distinctiveness also becomes easily muddled. As much as the *Woyane* ("rebels"), which has become a derogative term to refer to any member of the TPLF and is frequently extendable to signify a Tigrynian, the *Amhara* opposers also qualify as *Habesha*, ("Abyssinian") people coming from the Northern Highlands, and hence Christian (on the relationship between religion and ethnicism, see: Østebø, 2008b).

2005 to 2009 saw a truly revolutionary process in Ethiopian politics. From the "stolen elections" of May 2005 that amounted to a traumatic recognition by the EPRDF of their limited popular support (particularly in urban areas) to the 2010 plebiscite, the ruling party successfully managed to muzzle the opposition, recreate allegiances and induce an astounding swelling in party card holders that in fact established a highly effective (some say corruptive) patronage system based on financial and economic benefits for an emerging middle-class in rural and urban areas that accompanied the neo-liberal opening up and booming growth of the Ethiopian economy. Whole tracts of the population, who in 2005 felt confident that Ethiopia would become a free and democratic state, became tremendously disillusioned with politics and suspicious of the TPLF-controlled EPRDF ruling party. A continuous flow of rumours and flowering urban myths closely link prominent members of the ruling elite (not least Meles Zenawi's widow, *Waizero* Azeb Mesfin Haile, EFFORT Group's CEO) with both the land- and urban-grab spearheaded by a number of mushrooming business conglomerates. The *Woyane* tend to be vilified whenever respondents feel sure they are not at risk of being denounced to or spied upon by agents of the fearful Ministry of Internal Affairs. As a result of a situation where the ruling party has obliterated all democratic opposition (and where under the guise of the US-sanctioned "war against terror" the Ethiopian army has successfully cornered independentist guerrilla movements in the South of the country), Muslim urban youth has found religious militancy a soothing alternative to the inaccessible political game as grounds for claiming a social voice. Adherence to Wahhabism is more a means to an end than a goal itself as it means, according to interviewed student respondents, the possibility to enter politics when other means become unavailable.

Therefore, the spread of Wahhabism among urban Muslim youth should make us question whether this adherence is not more cultural than specifically religious, in the sense that it has the contours of a generation gap issue – brought about by a politically muzzled youth. It is also closely tied to the urban migration process, additionally fed by short-term migratory flows to the Gulf countries, and by Saudi Arabian-sourced promotion of Islamic teaching in the flowering new Islamic universities and schools in Ethiopia.

As early as May 2003, political scientist Medahne Tadesse warned about the spread of religious radicalization in Ethiopia. In a conference on federalism, conflict and peace building hosted by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and the German development agency, GTZ, he adamantly argued that "the religious equilibrium [in Ethiopia was] collapsing very quickly" and that the religious status quo in the country was being "dramatically eroded, incubating violent confrontation". His claim was that both the federal

government and the Orthodox Church were failing the country in offering at least mitigating solutions to the social and economic ills of the poorest quarters of society, thus giving way to other religions. He was specifically addressing the enormously successful proselytizing efforts of the *P'ent'ay* Churches in Southern Ethiopia, but in the back of his mind at least he was also concerned with the then growth of Sunni fundamentalism in Somalia, where the Islamic Courts were in control of the collapsed state structures (his main field of studies; see: Medahne Tadesse, 2002). Whatever the case, his conclusions had a generalizing tone that would also apply to Wahhabism when saying that "the hour of the miracle worker – religion - [had] finally come", and that "the contemporary religious militancy should be seen as a wholly new phenomenon and a threat to the peace, stability and independence of the country (IRIN, 2003).

A series of tense events that made headlines for most of last year seemed to be, on the surface at least, a confirmation of his prophetical alert. This was also the general tone of interviewed officials and party members when interpreting the multiple rebellions that fired up the Muslim community in Addis Ababa and elsewhere against the federal government's decision to meddle (repressively and violently at times) with the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC; *Mengelis*), the right to demonstrate (for religious purposes), the Islamic banking system (the closing of the of ZamZam Bank s.c., a Shariah-compliant, interest-free banking service, in June 2012), and mainly who was to define what Ethiopia's "official" Muslim doctrine should be. But, given that the "Muslim problem" was so clearly stirred up by the government itself, we can say that Medahne Tadesse's prophecy was clearly self-fulfilling in the sense that he, like others, have helped frame the government's path. Why, then, create a "Muslim problem"? The government attack on the Muslims was directed at the heart of their financial system, at their religious administrative structures and their doctrinal freedom. Even if too simplified, comments heard in informal conversations may harbour more than a grain of truth. They referred to last year's government clampdown as a diversion and a reflex of a discreet struggle for control between Azeb Mesfin's EFFORT and Al Amoudi's MEDROC. Whatever the reason, one thing seems clear and this is that there is no public evidence that there was "a threat to the peace, stability and independence of the country" in 2011 but still the government framed its action precisely in that way.

In June 2011, one year before the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Ethiopia's federal government took a puzzling step that lit the fuse of identitarian religious tensions: that of inviting a small group of 15 Lebanese theologians to educate Ethiopian Muslims in the doctrine promoted by the Beirut-based *Jam–iyyat al-Mashari al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya* (the "Association of Islamic Charitable Projects"), better known by its nickname: the *Al-Ahbash*.[11] A seminar chaired by Dr. Samir Qadi, vice-president of the Lebanese organization, and attended by Shiferaw Tekle Mariam, the powerful Minister of Internal Affairs, took place in Harar, followed by a lecture by Dr. Qadi at the Ghion Hotel in Addis Ababa on the subject of

[11] The Al-Ahbash had already had a discreet presence in the country since the late 1990s, but was no more than a fringe grouping, according to respondents from Addis Ababa.

"religious extremism". After that a series of indoctrinating sessions were arranged at universities and military installations throughout the country. According to Terje Østebø (2012: 244-245), at least 18,000 people (*imams*, *ulama* and students) were "mentored" (in English) in the teachings of Al-Ahbash and the inherent corrupting dangers of Wahhabism – indicating that anyone not accepting the new EIASC leadership would be "considered similar to an extremist and a terrorist" (Østebø, 2012: 246). This move sparked a controversy of unexpected proportions, followed by a stream of violently repressed rebellious demonstrations and months of government harassment and arrests of Muslims.

Before going into the interpretations the respondents offered of the series of events that pitted the Muslim community against the government for most of 2012, it is useful to briefly mention the origin and nature of the *Al-Ahbash* movement in Lebanon and elsewhere in the world.

The *Al-Ahbash* boomerang

The origins of the Al Ahbash / Wahhabiyya disputes in Lebanon and elsewhere in the world are rooted in the controversies that opposed two Harari scholars in the late 1940s. One was *Shaykh* Yusuf Abd al-Rahman al-Harari, a Harari educated in Mecca and Medina and an influence behind the pro-independentist Harari group that visited Mecca in the 1930s, who advocated a Wahhabist doctrinal reform of Ethiopian Islam. The other was *Shaykh* Abdalla ibn Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Hariri. The controversies between the two Harari scholars finally led to the latter's exile in Jerusalem and then Beirut in the 1960s (Hamzeh and Dekmejian, 1996: 219 seq.; Kabha and Erlich, 2006; 523-4). The beginnings of Al Ahbash (i.e. "the Ethiopians") in Lebanon are partly enveloped in mystery. It is known that Al Hariri and a group of followers took over the Association of Islamic Philanthropic Projects" (*Jam–iyyat al-Mashari al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya*) in 1983 and that the organization is known in Lebanon to have proselytized among the Sunni fighters, incorporating most members of the disbanded Abd al-Hafiz Qasim militia, while not involving itself in the civil war (Hamzeh and Dekmejian, 1996: 220).

Al-Hariri's ideas initially revolved around the virtues of moderation, political passiveness and the playing of sport, during the last period of the Lebanese civil war and after the group concentrated on violently antagonizing the Wahhabists, countering Ibn Taymiyya's and Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's precepts of intervening politically to achieve religious goals (Hamzeh and Dekmejian, 1996: 224). Today's Lebanese Sunnis and Shi'ites tend to view Al-Ahbash doctrine as insubstantial, populist and rather unsophisticated. A mishmash of Sunni, Sufi and Shi'a ideas are purportedly at the base of their doctrine (Hamzeh and Dekmejian, 1996: 222 seq.). Successive brawls with Wahhabists in Southern Beirut during and after the civil war eventually rocketed the group into the political arena and in the 1989 elections one Al-Ahbash candidate (Adnan al-Tarabulsi) was elected to the National Parliament. As Ezbohlah emerged victorious on the national scene, Al-Ahbash leaned progressively towards this Shi'ite militia, to the point that it is now viewed as their stooge, drawing its financial support from its ties to the Syrian government (Hamzeh and

Dekmejian, 1996: 225; Kabha and Erlich, 2006: 523). The basic self-contradiction underlying Al-Ahbash's standing, which contributed to its progressive loss of popularity in Lebanon (while thriving in the Muslim Middle East Diaspora in Western Europe and North America), lies in the fact that the group's opposition to Wahhabists's view that political intervention has legitimate religious grounds paradoxically led it to do exactly that by entering the complex sectarian game of party cum-ethnic politics to further uphold their position. By the time Al Hariri was invited by Meles Zenawi to travel to Ethiopia in 2008 (which he did not, as he died that year), Al-Ahbash had already lost a great part of its support basis in the Beirut suburbs and elsewhere in Lebanon.

The intriguing decision by the Ethiopian federal government to bring in the group of Lebanese members of Al-Ahbash to teach its exogenous and "post-modern" brand of Sufism with a view to declaring it the official Ethiopian Islamic doctrine, thus breaking a constitutional rule specifying the separation between state and religion, was followed by a more obvious but nonetheless equally illegal one. It was to intervene in the composition of the EIASC in November, 2012. Had these actions been successful, respondents say, they would have led to a split in the Muslim community and a more clear identification of radical adepts of Wahhabi views. As it was, the decision was met with general dissatisfaction and a continuous string of rebellious demonstrations in various cities that united the whole Muslim community against the government's decision. The Muslim Diaspora was likewise incensed, and definitely more vocal, since it was free from the recently installed surveillance and eavesdropping *Deep Packet Inspection* (DPI) software technology that the government acquired from the Chinese.[12]

The rallying cry was that religious matters should not be politicized, and that the government was intruding in forbidden areas by forbidding Friday gatherings, killing Muslim demonstrators (particularly the incidents at Grand Anwar Mosque in 21 July 2012), mingling with the *Mengelis* – EIASC, imposing government-appointed Al-Ahbash representatives (in the contested elections to the Council in November 6th, 2012, etc. Progressively, Sufis joined in the protest and even if Christians inside the country kept relatively aloof from the clash, Diaspora oppositionists and journalists referred to the clampdown as further proof of the government's illegitimacy. An "Arbitration Committee" composed of 17 respected Muslim religious leaders was nominated to try to dialogue with the government in order to remove the Al-Ahbash representatives from the EIASC and regain control of the board of the Awaliyya School.

[12] DPI technology used by the Information Network Security Agency (INSA) purportedly allows eavesdropping and data mining and also enables it to censor and intercept fixed and mobile communications. It blocks nationwide access to news websites and jams Diaspora-based Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and other external broadcasters such as the Voice of America and Germany's Deutsche Welle Amharic service. It spies on emails in real time and allows INSA to "look inside all traffic from a specific IP address, pick out the HTTP traffic, then drill even further down to capture only traffic headed to and from Gmail, and can even reassemble e-mails as they are typed out by the user". Surveillance is conducted through Ethio Telecom, the government monopoly that controls all Ethiopian telephone and Internet communications (see Negash, 2012; TOR, 2012).

Towards the end of the year, even the exiled Tehawedo Church in the US joined in the protest to oppose the Ethiopian government's decision to favour Al Ahbash. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the International Crisis Group and other respected international organizations and also the US by-partisan Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) condemned the arrests of leaders of the "peaceful protests" under the controversial 2009 Anti-Terrorist Proclamation (ATP). Finally, the government partially backed down as the EPRDF scrambled to hold control of the country in the wake of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's death, announced on August 21st, 2012. In interviews carried out in March and April 2013, the Muslim respondents were adamant. "The government plan to divide the Muslim community backfired and had exactly the opposed effect". "It is an embarrassing defeat for the EPRDF". The "divide and rule" tactics that the ruling party had been using so successfully in ethnic politics, especially directed at Amhara and Oromo, the largest groups, failed miserably in the confrontation against the Muslim community and ended up being a major blow against the ethnicization discourse itself: "Oromo, Harari, Gurage, Amhara – even Tigray – we are all Muslims", declared an AAU student interviewee who had been involved in the demonstrations of 2012. Still, the court appearances of accused Muslim members of the "Arbitration Committee" such as Abubakar Ahmed and spokesman Ahmedin Jebel, and journalists Yusuf Getachew and Solomon Kebede, from the banned Islamic magazine *Yemuslimoch Guday* in early April 2013 enraged most Muslims. They stood accused of committing "terrorist acts" and planning and conspiring to commit terrorist acts under Articles 3 and 4 of the ATP. There were also accusations of mistreatment of the detainees in the notorious Maikelawi prison.

A government hard-landing or just a respite?

A few months later Meles Zenawi's death, a curious document was "leaked" on the website of the Awramba Times, an Addis Ababa newspaper, and quickly spread to digital outlets and social media pages. The scanned Word file that contained the supposed minutes of an urgent meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) projects an interesting light on the whole issue. It is well worth summarizing it here:

> The Muslim protest was the main agenda of the meeting, focused on the Muslims' requests to remove the current Megelis' (EIASC's) members appointed by the government, to reorganize the administrative board of the Awaliyya School, and to terminate the Al-Ahbash indoctrination. Discussed also was an assessment report of all official interventions dealing with the above requests, particularly a series of interviews carried out with the members of Megelis, discussions with the Lebanese Al-Ahbash invited by the government, analysis of studies written by Western intelligence experts on the Horn of Africa, discussions with "several members of Ethiopian society", and papers authored by the "Israeli Hagay [Hagai Erlich, no doubt] on Ethiopian Muslims".
>
> The measures proposed in the report were: to try keeping the key persons involved the protest separated from other Muslims and to weaken the opposition movement from inside, by relating the Wahhabi movement with terrorism-related activities, to create suspicion in the general Muslim community on the motives of the movement, and to pressure the Muslim leaders to find a solution for the current conflict. The document also assesses measures taken by the police and

> the character of the “Committee” elected by the Muslims. Also discussed was the fact that “key persons in the Ehadig” (the Amharic name of the EPRDF) opposed the way the government had been dealing with the Muslims' protest. The document states that the NSC members agreed that the Muslims' request in the year 2004 (Ethiopian Calendar; 2012) was not treated properly, and that they agreed on the following:
>
> The government hadn't fully understood the Muslims' issues and as a result the measures taken were not adequate; its interpretation of the nature of their protests was incorrect and complicated the situation further; a better remedy had to be found to prevent the protests becoming a political problem; the governmental fears of the protests were misplaced; the measures taken by the current Megelis and by the Ministry of Federal Affairs to deal with the original Muslim request had brought about strong opposition from the community.
>
> They also agreed that the current Megelis' members hadn't been elected and had overstayed in their position: hence, the Muslims' request to remove them and organise an election was appropriate; that the conflict contributed to the unpopularity of the EPRDF among Muslims; that the protests were legal, their aim was of religious, not political, nature, that the movement was free from foreign intervention and had no hidden political interests, as well as no relation with any kind of outside terrorist groups; that the Muslim community had been expressing their objections peacefully and that even the Friday prayers on Ginbot the 3rd (May 11th, 2012) hadn't disturbed the International Economic Forum that was held in the same day in Addis Ababa.
>
> In conclusion, the document states that: the Al-Ahbash training programme should be immediately stopped; decisions regarding the board of the Awaliyya school should be devolved to the Muslim community; the election of the Megelis should be transparent and according with the Muslims' wishes; the ZamZam Bank should be allowed to operate, as soon as possible; the governmental media coverage of the protests should be corrected and revised; discussions with the Muslim leaders should continue and remedies should be found urgently; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should participate in clearing the confusion created by the protest; people arrested as a result of the conflict should be urgently released; internal conflicts between members of the EPRDF should be discussed and cleared; and the Ministry of Federal Affairs should act to appease the rebellion. (Awramba Times, 2013).

By any means, this is an astounding document. Suspicions that it was forged are widespread among Muslims. People point particularly to the fact that it serves the purpose of isolating Shiferaw Teklemariam, the Minister of Federal Affairs within the TPLF[13] (thus being the work of Azeb Mesfin’s lobby) and of extricating the memory of Meles Zenawi from the mess he himself created the previous year. The online comments on the Awramba Times piece give a good portrait of how readers received it, flatly doubting the document's veracity.[14] The very fact that the page is not down and remains accessible makes the leak seem purposely “planted”.

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[13] In page 2 of the document he is quoted as saying he "tried to create problems among Muslims, aiming at dividing them".

[14] In a post dated March 15, 2013, a user calling himself Tazabi says: “The document is all fake. To convince us that it was leaked from the PM's office, they printed the footer which says C://My Document/PM office/Moslem/004. This was intended to convince us this document was released from Prime Minister’s office. However, the motive of this document is different. They believed that people would be cheated the moment they saw the footer. We know there is no computer called “PM office” and such information would never be kept there in any way as it might be prone to

It is in fact probable that it was produced after Meles Zenawi's death and allowed to spread and be assessed inside the country (given the NSA's ability to block any specific internet IP, the fact that it was not is most telling). It came out at roughly the same time as the new Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn declared in a parliamenty address on 16 October 2012: "The government is not and would not interfere in the affairs of any religion in the country". In any case, as there is no official position regarding its contents, or any denial of its authenticity, we can only speculate about its origin and intentions. Muslim respondents declared it to be counter-information, in view of the contradicting occurrences of continued police harassment of the community and the judicial charges against the "Arbitration Committee" members, the continued ban on ZamZam Bank operations and of suspension of the EIASC. They concede that the government trump card of the Al-Ahbash had been exhausted and that repression around mosques has subsided. On the other hand, Muslims leaders have been discreetly pressing for a stand-down of demonstrations in a wait-and-see strategy. The document seems to be a belated ashamed recognition that Muslim matters had been mishandled by the government and that not changing course could lead to mounting, rebellious politicization of the Muslim community. As much as the respondents may complain about the situation, they admit that a new stage had been reached in terms of internal unity of the Muslim community.

Against catastrophist expectations, the country did not fall into chaos after the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and the almost simultaneous death of *Abuna* Paulos (the Ethiopian Orthodox patriarch). Even if it was defeated in its stand against the Muslim community, the EPDRF still has a steady hold over the general political situation. As lobbies inside the governing elite carefully reposition themselves, a national hero cult around the late Prime Minister is being tentatively tried in official propaganda, the secret services maintain business as usual and conflicts and tensions concerning the Muslim community have largely subsided. During our latest visit to the country (March and April 2013), except for the humiliating court appearance of respected Muslim leaders, there are practically no records of clashes around mosques or news of inflamed declarations, press controversies or conspicuous detentions. The urban Muslim population continues to grow and thrive. There is a feeling of a cautious respite and as the waters of the Blue Nile begin to be diverted in Bani-Shangul there is hope that the Great Renaissance Dam may help Ethiopian Muslims cease to live in a fortress beleaguered by the *Woyane*.

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security attack. Hence, the document is hilarious. Think of the people who can potentially release the document. They know they will be hanged in daylight if they do this. I believe that the document was released to distract us from the controversies of the tplf meeting and its division recently" (Awramba Times, 2013).

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