

Islam, Ethnicity, and the State in Ethiopia/Horn of Africa

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As part of my major research project on religion and ethnicity in the Horn of Africa I spent summer 2011 doing fieldwork in Ethiopia. During this time I got the opportunity to talk to numerous former guerilla-fighters engaged in armed struggle against the Ethiopian regimes of the 1960s and 1970s. The project is (so far) focusing on the so-called Somali and Oromo liberation movements struggling for various forms of autonomy. The aim of the research is to provide much-needed empirical knowledge and new perspectives on the nature and developments of the Somali and Oromo ethno-nationalist movements in the south-eastern parts of Ethiopia. As they emerged in Muslim-dominated areas, a major thesis of the project is that religion (i.e. Islam) has played a more important role than generally assumed. This empirical research documents this importance, and demonstrates that perceived religious prejudices and religiously biased policies were crucial factors in the production and continuation of these movements. It will analyze the reciprocal relations between ethnicity and religion in the formation of these movements, how this was played out in generating and legitimizing their struggles, and how religion and ethnicity produced highly complex inter- and intra-group relations.

The project will also provide a more nuanced understanding of inter-religious relations in Ethiopia/Horn of Africa. In particular, I challenge the assumption that Ethiopia is a model for peaceful inter-religious co-existence, and demonstrate how the historical dominance of Christianity as a political culture and state-ideology has produced a lasting asymmetric relationship and consequently antagonistic attitudes between Christians and Muslims. With a focus on both domestic and regional political developments, I will also explore how Ethiopia's Christian heritage has played and continues to play a role in its policies in the Horn. The more general and theoretical objective is to apply the empirical findings to generate new



perspectives on how to conceptualize the relationship between religion and ethnicity, particularly with regard to inter-group conflicts.

Parallel to this, I have also been working on a project related to Islam and politics in contemporary Ethiopia, analyzing the trajectory of the current regime's policy towards the Muslim community in Ethiopia. The data for this was collected during the summer 2011, but draws also from previous research. The project amply demonstrates that the Ethiopian government has changed its policy from monitoring and controlling the Muslim community to increasingly meddling into internal religious affairs – with the aim of promoting a particular state-sanctioned version of Islam. Implicit in this are the attempts to marginalize and stigmatize Islamic groups which are perceived detrimental to political stability. The research moreover points to relevant factors for understand-

ing this, and analyzes how a state-driven dichotomization of the Muslim community is creating highly interesting discourses within Ethiopia.

I have also completed the publication process of my book *Localising Salafism* which was published by Brill (Leiden) in October. In addition I have, together with Patrick Desplat (Cologne University) continued editing a volume on contemporary Islam in Ethiopia. This book focuses on changes with regard to the Muslim communities in post-1991 Ethiopia, including intra-religious dynamics within the Muslim communities, Islam intersected to Ethiopian public and political spheres, and Islam in Ethiopia in relation to the geo-political discourses in the wider Horn of Africa. Our plan is to get this book under contract in 2012.

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