

Mechahal or Mechal? Muslims Contesting Ethiopia's Religious Past

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Religious identification has recently come to rival ethnic identification in Ethiopia despite the latter's institutionalization within the new political structure, i.e., ethnic federalism. This has brought the contested nature of Ethiopia's religious past into the realm of notice. For members of the Orthodox Church Ethiopia is exemplary for peaceful religious co-existence, largely thanks to the 'accommodating' nature of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. For Muslims, except for the early encounter between Islam and Ethiopia (the First Hijra), Ethiopia has failed to accommodate religious pluralism, especially because of the political dominance and 'intolerance' of the EOC. The government, on the other hand, has introduced the discourse of religious tolerance (*ye haimanot mechachal*); that Ethiopia's religious past is a land of religious tolerance par excellence especially at a time when the whole world is in a religious turbulence. The Muslims contest both the Christians' and the government's representations of religious co-existence or tolerance, for, in their perspective, the apt term that captures the asymmetric inter-faith relations in Ethiopia is not *mechachal*, but rather *mechal* (forbearance) of the Christian hegemony. The paper explains this contestation with a reference to the discourse/power nexus conceptual framework. Framed this way, the discursive struggle is not merely competing representations of history. Facts, as several theorists have noted, are always in the service of some contemporary agenda. The paper analyses the political struggles that underpins the divergent representation of Ethiopia