# *Accommodation, tolerance or forbearance?*
# *The politics of representing Ethiopia's religious past*

## *Introduction*

Ethiopian historiography, like history writing elsewhere, is a contested terrain. Historiography is acutely contested particularly in countries where history is one of the cores of political legitimacy (Veyne 1984; Toggia 2008). If the 10th BC legendary king Menelik I – son of the Ethiopian Queen Sheba and the Israelite king Solomon – was the foundational myth for political legitimacy of imperial Ethiopia, so is the peasant rebellion of the 1940s (the Weyane rebellion) the historical reference point for the current government of Ethiopia – the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which in fact styled itself as the Second Weyane (Medhane and Young 2003). Historical consciousness from below is also filled with references to the 'remote' past. If Christians refer to the Solomonic legend to claim the status of the 'chosen nation' (Bonacci 2000), so are Ethiopian Muslims ground their struggle for recognition as Ethiopian citizens in reference to their own foundational myth; the emigration of the companions of the Prophet Mohammed to Ethiopia, that they prestigiously describe as the 'First Hijra' (Dereje 2011). Overwhelmed by the hegemonic narrative of the Orthodox Church as 'the chosen nation' and the Muslims' counter-narrative of Ethiopia as 'the land of the First Hijra', it is no wonder thus Ethiopian Protestants, too, have sought to establish local roots through the construction of yet a new 'Great tradition' for Ethiopia as 'the land of the Reformation', according to which Ethiopia 'protested' ahead of Germany by three decades.

Perhaps there are very few countries as burdened by their past as Ethiopia. It is no wonder thus history has been one of the major sites of political contestation. The Ethiopian polity has gone through a period of contestation in the last four decades. The terms of the contestation has been variously defined. The 1974 revolution has redefined imperial Ethiopia in class terms, the country ultimately embracing socialism for nearly two decades. The 1991 regime change has brought ethnicity to the political centre-stage which translated into a new political order in the form of ethnic federalism. In recent years religion has rivalled ethnicity as a focus of social identification and a site of political contestation. According to the 2007 census the major religious groups in contemporary Ethiopia are followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (42 %); Muslims (34%) and Protestants (18%) of the country's 80 million people.

In these new frames of reference – class, ethnicity and religion - heroes have now become villains, and villains have been redefined as heroes, evident in the attempts to bring down old monuments or erect new ones. Similarly, 'dark' ages have been lighted and perceived as 'golden' ages, and the very life span of the country is contested whether it is three millennia old or a mere centenary. The paper focuses on the contested nature of Ethiopia's religious past in which three sets of actors advance competing schemes of interpretation. For Christian Ethiopians the dominant plot in Ethiopian history is religious accommodation by the dominant Ethiopian Orthodox Church of the country's religious minorities. The current Ethiopian government advances the discourse of religious tolerance while describing the country's religious past. The Muslims, on the other hand, contest both the Christians' discourse of accommodation and the government's discourse of religious tolerance. In their perspective the dominant historical plot in Ethiopian history is rather Muslims' forbearance of the structures of religious inequality upheld by the dominant Christian elites and the Ethiopian state that they represent. Whether state or popular historiography they all have a narrow focus that guides the selective memory and reduction of historical complexity. Unfortunately even academic historiography, particularly the predominant nationalist variety, is very partisan and largely corresponds to the EOC's historiography (Toggai 2008: 324-325).

A more balanced account of Ethiopia's religious past is still 'under construction'. Hussein Ahmed's recent rendition is perhaps a pioneering work. In an article entitled Coexistence and/ or Confrontation: Towards a Reappraisal of Christian – Muslim encounter in contemporary Ethiopia, Hussein argued that 'Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia from the earliest times to the present were both consensual and conflictual, and that the conventional over-emphasis on the former has obscured - and marginalized and distorted - the occasional confrontational aspects of the relations that also need to be historicized, contextualized and assessed (Hussein 2006: 1). The objective of this paper is not to shed further light on 'objective' history but rather to describe and analyse the one-sided accent that the state and popular historiography have on Ethiopia's religious past. Narratives play a crucial role in building legitimacy for a cause. As Rotberg (2006:4) noted,' at the heart of narratives of struggle and response is collective memory' and 'such memory need not reflect truth; instead, it portrays a truth that is functional for a group's ongoing existence […] The social reality of the present explains the past'. After describing the dominant plots, the paper analyses the political project each discourse serves. The competing narratives - accommodation, tolerance and forbearance - signify contemporary political struggles, which have resulted in the escalation of religious conflicts in post 1991 Ethiopia. The paper argues that writing history is as much about making history as it is about understanding of the past. The key

historical events which are at the heart of the contestation are the coming of the companions of the Prophet Mohammed to Ethiopia in AD 625 and the ultimate conversion of their Christian king host; the wars of Amhmed Gragn in the 16th century, and the nation building project of the Christian emperors and the formation of the modern Ethiopian state by the end of the 19th century.

## *Competing Narratives of Ethiopian History*

*The EOC's narrative of religious accommodation*

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of the oldest Christian establishments in Africa (Tadesse 1972: 28). Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia in the 4th century AD from the Church of Alexandria which had supplied all of its bishops up until the mid 20th century (Erlich 2000). The EOC uses the term *mechachal* to describe Ethiopia's religious past. The Amharic term *mechachal* as used by the EOC means accommodation, a double-edged discourse that signifies both the nativism of the EOC and the latecomerness of the other religious groups. EOC's self-understanding and the Ethiopian polity is principally based on references to sacred narratives, i.e., the primacy of Ethiopia in the Judeo-Christian tradition as attested by scriptures. Foremost in these sacred narratives is the mentioning of the name Ethiopia more than forty times in the Old Testament (Ullendorff 1967). The special status Ethiopia occupies is buttressed by the 14th century manuscript known as Kebre Negest (Glory of kings). The Kebre Negest has produced a textual evidence for the Solomonic legend as the foundation of the Ethiopian state. As a national epic it has also served as the mythological charter for Ethiopians as 'the chosen nation' (Budge 1932). The associated belief in the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant from Israel (Jerusalem) to Ethiopia (Axum) is emblematic of the geographical transfer of divine favour. The EOC also claims supremacy in Christianity which claims its earliest origins from the royal official who is said to have been baptised by Philip the Evangelist[1], not the conversion of Axumite king Ezana in the 4th century AD.

Central to EOC's narrative of the religious past is the intimacy between Church and state in Ethiopian history that run until the 1974 secular rupture, and by extension the ownership claim it advances over the Ethiopian nation. It is true that with little exception such as the Judaic challenge of the 9th century (Queen Yodit's destruction of the Axumite kingdom); the Islamic challenge of the 16th century (the wars of Ahmed Gragn), and the Catholic interlude in the 17th

[1] Act 8:27

century, the Ethiopian state has been ruled by Christian elites who proclaimed Christianity as the official state religion of the country, and since 1974 by power elites predominantly with Christian background. In effect, the EOC views other religious groups as *mete* (late comers), and foreigners at worst. Despite its 'nativity' the EOC claims a high moral ground the way it has accommodated Islam and other Christian denominations. The EOC recognises the coming of the companions of the Prophet Mohammed (the sahaba) to Ethiopia in 625 Ad (Aba Samuel 2009: 14-15). What it rejects, and does so vehemently, is the Muslims' claiming that the Christian king Armha who hosted the sahaba was converted to Islam. Underneath the controversy surrounding this historical event we find a selective memory at work. None of the Christian sources have documented the coming of the sahaba to Ethiopia. The story was documented by Muslim Arab scholars and is stored in local Muslim traditions. The EOC has got to know about the event therefore primarily through the works of Muslim scholars. The EOC's major attraction in the story relates to the description of habesha (Ethiopian) by the Prophet Mohammed as the land of righteousness and the hospitality the sahaba got from a Christian king, a gratitude which the Prophet is said to have reciprocated by forbidding Muslims from attacking Ethiopia so long as they do not take the initiative. The reference to the conversion of king Armha (renamed by Muslims as king Ahmed Najashi ) by the same sources is rejected as biased, worst a fabrication by Muslim fundamentalists to advance a political agenda (EOC 2008). 'Academic' historiography, most of which is written by Ethiopian historians of an EOC background (Sergew 1967; Tadesse 1972; Ephrem 2008) and western scholars very sympathetic to the EOC (Trimingham 1952; Budge 1965), corroborates EOC's position.

The EOC also refers to the economic ties with and the political tolerance towards the Islamic principalities that sprung up in the south-eastern part of the country in the medieval period. To the extent it acknowledges the protracted wars between the Christian kingdom and the Islamic principalities the EOC interprets it as punitive measures when the latter had become insubordinate and disrupted the long distance trade. The wars are talked about as 'religious' only with rise of Ahmed Gragn who the EOC depicts as an 'Ottoman proxy'. The involvement of the Turks and the Portuguese, respectively, on the side of the Muslims and the Christians, certainly escalated the hegemonic struggle between the Christian kingdom and the Islamic principalities (Hussein 2006). If the military support Ahmed Gragn got from the Turks was important in altering the power relations in 1529, so was the Portuguese support central in restoring the hegemony of the Christian kingdom in 1543. However, Islamic revival and Christian-Muslims conflicts in Ethiopia have been externalised ever since. Even what appears to be the most conspicuous example of religious homogenisation as a strategy of nation building first attempted

by emperor Zera Yaqob in the 15th century (Bahru 2008) and in a more dramatic manner by Emperor Yohannes IV in the second half of the 19th century (Hussein 2006) is represented by the EOC as Christian irredentism than religious coercion, i.e., restoring Christian territories and people lost to the Muslims during the wars of Ahmed Gragn (Aba Samuel 2009:32). The second half of the 19th century marked a renewed struggle for hegemony between the Christian kingdom and the Islamic states. The revival of the Christian kingdom was initiated by Emperor Tewodros (1855 -1869) and Emperor Yohannes (1872-1889), who vigorously sought to curb the rise of Islamic power in the region (Bahru 2002). Both 'attempted to formally proscribe the practice of Islamic religion, endeavoring to enforce mass conversion to Christianity to enhance national unity' (Abbink 1998: 115).

The recurrent theme in EOC's representation of Ethiopian history in general and the country's religious past in particular is condescended in one Amharic expression: *bagoresin tenekesin* (aggression in return for hospitality). Accordingly, the EOC's accommodation of religious minorities has never been reciprocated by whether the Muslims, Catholics or Protestants. In fact, they have all followed a usurpatory strategy and sought to expand at its expense. According to the EOC's definition of the inter-faith relational situation, this is the case because they have all external constituencies and ultimately serve the interests of foreign countries. Specifically, Muslims who are assertive of their 'rights' are under Saudi Arabian 'payrolls', whereas Protestants are latest edition of the conspiracy of the western missionaries. EOC alone truly represent national interest, a Church which provides the country with its dominant national symbols. Accordingly, Muslims are divided into 'good' and 'bad', respectively, referring to the 'home-grown' Sufis and the 'foreign-based' Islamic reform movements. While highlighting the 'exceptionally' tolerant track record of the Orthodox Church, Ephraim (2008: 156) noted 'one cannot think of any other country besides Ethiopia with a state religion of Christianity - as was the case until 1974 - where a large Muslim minority had lived along with Christians.

*The government's discourse of religious tolerance*

The imperial government had basically echoed the EOC's historiography. Church and State were intertwined. The EOC had enjoyed economic privileges and wielded a political leverage over the Ethiopian state for which it had supplied with the foundational myth. The military regime (the Derg) that replaced the imperial government had followed an entirely different policy of state building on a secular basis. Religion was not only redefined as 'opium of the masses' but the Derg had even sought to stamp out the religious institutions that shape the world view of the ordinary

people (Bonacci 2000: 8-13). It was only in the last darkest hours of the regime that religion was accorded a more dignified position in public space. In fact, the Derg made some attempts to recycle old national symbols that it had deconstructed during the revolutionary fervour when it had faced strong resistance from Eritrean nationalism and various ethno-liberation movements. History reconstructed this way the Christian emperors were no longer feudal lords who 'oppressed' the broad masses but nation builders who valiantly fought the preservation of the sovereignty of the country against foreign invaders.

Ethiopia has entered a new period of historical contestation since 1991. The Derg was overthrown in 1991 by ethnic liberation movements that formed the coalition of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a political organisation which claims to represent the Tigrean ethnic group, is the dominant political force within the EPRDF coalition. This is despite the smaller population size of the Tigreans as compared with the other member organisations of the EPRDF which claim to represent the three largest ethnic groups of the country, i.e., the Oromo, the Amhara and the southern Ethiopians[2]. The new political order established by the EPRDF – ethnic federalism – is built on an entirely new historical edifice. Ethiopian history was rewritten by the EPRDF ethnicity as the dominant plot. The new deconstructionist drive has reduced Ethiopia's historical longevity from three millennia to a mere centenary. The new historical reference point in the writing of Ethiopian history is the territorial expansion of emperor Menelik II in the second half of the 19th century that culminated in the formation of the modern Ethiopian state by the end of that century. The accent is not on the Ethiopian nation that was built but rather on the nations destroyed by the nation-building project. Ethiopia is no longer the chosen nation but a prison house of ethnic groups which needed emancipation. As such, Ethiopia has embarked on a unique experiment in building a political order with a formal recognition of ethnicity as the most legitimate principle of social organisation and unit of political action. The imperial and the Derg governments are associated by the TPLF/EPRDF with the Amhara ethnic group. 'Amhara domination' and liberation from it has been the main reference point in the political mobilisation of ethno-liberation movements.

The 1995 Constitution and the new Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia has generously recognised ethnic rights with self determination up to and including the right for secession. In fact, political sovereignty resides in ethnic groups, who are accorded the status of the authors of

[2] According to the 2007 census, the Oromo, the Amhara, South, and the Tigreans constitute, respectively, 35 %, 25.9%, 19.4, and 5.9% of the country's population.

the Constitution as the new ethnic contract. Nine ethnic-based regional states have been formed, most of which are 'owned' by a majority ethnic group. The Constitution also recognises religious inequality and grants the right to freedom and secularism. Although the main thrust in EPRDF's political dispensation is ethnicity it has also sought to make alliances with other marginalised groups such as Muslims. Taking advantage of the new liberal opening Muslims have attained a greater visibility in the Ethiopian public space since 1991 (Hussien 2006). Emboldened by the rights language popularised by the EPRDF Muslims have pressed for greater rights in their struggle for recognition by the dominant Christian population and a more substantive rights regime by the EPRDF. The EOC has also gone through a period of revival, especially after the establishment of a neo-conservative youth movement known as Mahibere Qidusan (Association in the name of Saints). Other religious groups, especially, the Protestants, have become vibrant and registered a dramatic demographic growth, with an exponential growth from a merely 1 per cent in the 1960 to nearly 19 per cent in 2007 (Tibebe 1997: 4). The competition among these religious groups have not only resulted in sporadic conflicts but also sent the message to EPRDF that ethnicity is no longer 'the' unit of social identification upon which the new political structure is built. Although the constitution prohibits a political manifestation of religious identity various politically oriented religious organisations have sprung up. The solidifying of the religious boundary, coupled with the state – sponsored ethnic bordering process, has threatened the survival of the nation, and particularly EPRDF's claim that its emanicipatory project has redressed all forms of social inequality including religion.

Amidst religious tension the EPRDF has propounded the discourse of *ye haymanot mechachal* (religious tolerance). This has necessitated a modification on the gloomy painting of Ethiopia's past that it has been intensely engaged in over a decade and 'brightens' its religious past. While claiming to have abolished religious inequality from above (state level) the 'long standing peaceful co-existence' from below has come to be celebrated. Ethiopia has been hailed as a 'model' of peaceful co-existence and religious tolerance through government mass media and the various speeches delivered by the Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. The rise of religious conflicts in post 1991 Ethiopia is explained as the use of religion as a cover by 'bankrupt' politicians, especially since the contested May 2005 national election. The following extract from a speech the Prime Minister delivered in a youth meeting throws light on the government's discourse of religious tolerance:

> There are destructive forces on both sides that operate under the cover of religion. Among Christians, particularly some followers of the Orthodox Church, there are attempts to interpret Ethiopian history only from a Christian perspective; a perspective which has generated the slogan of 'Ethiopia is an Island of Christianity'. This position is exclusive and is anathema of religious equality. This is in fact a sick

> perspective. There are even some in the EOC leadership who espouse this backward perspective. There are also some internal and external political forces who subscribe to this backward perspective in order to foment unrest in the country. Similarly, among Muslim circles, there are even forces who want to destroy by force the home-grown Islam [Sufism]. There are also Muslims who provoke religious conflict by going to other religions' places of worship and pronounce religious slogans. There are even some sheikhs and other Muslim leaders who support such provocative acts. There are also some political forces from inside and outside the country who subscribe to the same position. But the truth is that Ethiopia's especial trade mark in the international community is religious tolerance. Let me cite here one anecdote. When the president of Germany came to Ethiopia he paid a visit to Harar. He could not believe what he saw, i.e., the ease at which Muslims and Christians blend and the tolerant ambience of the city of Harrar. He was baffled by the strong social ties across the religious boundary and wanted to know where it is coming from. In fact, he 'reprimanded' us for not sharing it with the rest of the world at a time when religious conflict is on the rise globally. This is the dominant impression of other foreign visitors to the country. It is this unique history which is now targeted. My government will do its level best to thwart these destructive forces. The government's patience is running out regarding the incitement of religious conflict under the pretext of being a priest or a sheikh. We recognise that religion and state should be separated. That is what we have enshrined secularism in the Constitution. But this does not mean that the government would sit idly while destructive forces incite religious unrest. There is a concerted effort by internal and external forces to destroy our cultural fabric and the pride we take on our history of religious tolerance (Extract from a Speech by Meles Zenawi during the meeting with the youth, ETV, February 9, 2009, Addis Ababa, author's translation from Amharic).

The discourse of religious tolerance here abundantly refers to 'destructive' forces. Internally these are opposition political parties who are politically 'bankrupt' after the failure of their bid to power during and since the 2005 election. The external destructive forces is masterminded by Eritrea with whom Ethiopia has been locked in conflict over a disputed border since the outbreak of a major war in 1998 and its transformation into a proxy war since the inconclusive peace agreement in 2000.

*Forbearance – Muslims' narrative of Ethiopia's religious past*

Muslims contest the Christians' discourse of religious accommodation and the government's discourse of religious tolerance. Twisting the term *mechachal,* which variously signifies accommodation or tolerance, the Muslims use the term *mechal* as the dominant historical plot in inter-faith relations. The Amharic term *mechal* means forbearance. Muslims reject the term *mechachal* because it signifies symmetry which Ethiopia's religious past is not. Accordingly, there has never been religious tolerance in Ethiopia. Despite its antiquity and large demographic size Islam in Ethiopia has been marginalized by the church and the state. Muslims have either adapted to or resisted Christian political power in the post-Najashi period. They critique the Christians' discourse of religious accommodation, which in their perspective is tantamount to a call for assimilation:

> The term *mechachal* is inappropriate in the Ethiopian context. Tolerance or co-existence is understood as assimilation. Muslims are regarded as good Muslims in places such as Wello where they attend Christian holidays. The quintessential Christian story of religious tolerance is recounting Muslims celebrating Timiqet

(Baptism); drinking *tej* (mead) in *a mahiber* (religious association) or making contribution for the construction of Churches. But these are neither accommodation nor co-existence. According to Islamic tenets all these practices fall into the category of *shirk* (idolatry practices). Co-existence means accepting ways of life other than one's own for what they are. Terms such as accommodation, co-existence and tolerance are mistranslated in Ethiopia. When a Muslim starts practicing the regular prayers, quits smoking or drinking, he becomes *akirari* (fundamentalist) in the eyes of the Christians. Otherwise, these are the ABC of Islam. There are more strenuous demands than these elementary ones. It is the same with *hijab* or *niqab*. Veiling is not a sign of 'fundamentalism'. It is part of religious fulfillment. Terms such as *akirarinet*, *tsinfegninet* and *mechachal* need to be redefined in the Ethiopian context (Hassen Taju, interview, Najashi online radio, www.ethiopianmuslims.net, March 20111).

Muslims foundational myth as Ethiopian citizens dates back to the First Hijra. They contest the Christians' 'double standards' in reading history. In an incisive article entitled 'The narrators of our history' published in many Muslim media outlets as well as popular news papers, Ibrahim Mulushewa (2009) criticized the selective memory and 'collusion' between academic and Christian historiography in vehemently denying Najashi's conversion into Islam. Ibrahim contests the Christian historiography at various levels. For one, the story of one of the sahaba being converted to Christianity was reported by the Muslim Arab scholars in the same works where they mentioned Najashi's conversion into Islam. Besides, the Arab scholars had also mentioned clerical opposition that Najashi faced despite the Christians' contention that had the king been converted into Islam there would have been mass unrest like when an Orthodox king converted to Catholicism in the 17th century. Muslims also bring in a third type of evidence to substantiate their claim that Ahmed Najashi was converted into Islam, i.e., the first ritual of *Salatul Ghaib*, the Islamic funeral prayer in absentia, was first done by the prophet to king Najashi honoring the favors he did to his companions and accepting Islam. Ibrahim, and many other Muslim scholars and activists characterize the scholarly 'denial' of Najashi's conversion as part of establishing the Christian hegemony in Ethiopia. In the perspective of the Muslims the First Hijra and the conversion of king Najashi as the first Muslim ruler outside of Arabia is more plausible than the controversial Solomonic legend. They refer to the original Hebraic version of the bible in which the word Kush is used instead of Ethiopia unlike the Greek version. Accordingly, both the Hebraic term Kush and the Greek term Ethiopia refers to Nubian/the Sudan, not present-day Ethiopia (Ye Muslimoch Guday 2009).

Another important bone of contention between Muslims and Christians is the diametrically opposite representational mode of Ahmed Gragn. Christian historiography depicts Ahmed Gragn as demonic under the service of external interests. Invoking Ahmed Gragn is in fact a code word for the 'permanent danger' Muslims can pose to the very survival of the Ethiopian nation. Expectedly, for Muslims Ahmed Gragn has always been a hero, a source of fame and glory for not only reversing Christian aggression but also establishing an Islamic empire at the ruins of the Christian kingdom. As the Christian historiography was hegemonic throughout the imperial

period and somehow continued during the Derg period, Muslims` alternative historical narrative had gone underground. It was in Somalia, not in Ethiopia, where Ahmed Gragn has been accorded a heroic status inscribed into a statue that is erected on his behalf in Mogadishu. Post 1991 Ethiopia has created a new field of political possibility for historical reexamination. In addition to the contentious nature of king Najashi and his conversion Muslims have focused on redefining Ahmed Gragn as a hero in post 1991 Ethiopia. Books have been written in Ethiopia and in the diaspora challenging Christian historiography. A third contentious area in Ethiopian history is the process of state formation that culminated in the formation of the modern Ethiopian state at the end of the 19th century. What Christian historiography calls irredentism or reunification is contested by Muslims as 'the dark side' of Ethiopian history when Muslims were forcefully converted into Christianity and their kingdoms and sheikdoms lost their political sovereignty; a political process which they consider is at the centre of the continuity of structures of religious inequality.

Aided by EPRDF's historical revisionism, which centers on the process of empire building by emperor Menilik, albeit for ethnic if not religious motive, Muslims have noted in their own burgeoning historiography the painful birth of the modern Ethiopian state at the expense of the Islamic heritage of the country. The battle of Chelenqo, the decisive battle where king Menelik conquered the Islamic city state of Harrar in 1887 is, for instance, now celebrated in the regional state of Harrar not for 'the reunification' by Menilik but the resistance put up by its ruler Amir Abdullahi. The city of Harar is not celebrated as a model of religious tolerance, as the Prime Minister put it, but rather lamented for the progressive decline of Islam in its home town under the pretext of multi-culturalism. Similarly, Muslims protested when the Amhara regional state sought to erect a status for king Michael of Wello as part of the Ethiopian Millennium celebration. King Michael is a 'sell out' for Muslims who betrayed his Islamic faith under duress during the forceful Christianization project of Emperor Yohannes IV and in return for a political reward as the king of Wello. Confronted by a determined resistance the regional state suspended its plan to build a status for king Michael of Wello. Interestingly, Muslims proposed that should a status be erected let it be for his son, Lij Eyasu, who dearly paid politically for his policy of genuine religious accommodation (Bahru 2008: 60).

Muslims acknowledge the redress through religious reforms carried out by the Derg and the current EPRDF government. They are thankful for that. The socio-political reforms brought by the 1974 revolution and the end of the Christian monarchy partly redressed the marginalization of Muslims in Ethiopia (Hussein 1994). Church and state parted company and Ethiopia has been

a secular state ever since. For the first time in the history of the country, religious freedom was proclaimed and Islam gained parity with Christianity in political dispensation (Abbink 1998; Hussein 2006, Ostebo 2008). The religious reform of the Derg, however, did not go to the extent of redefining the parameters of Ethiopia's national identity. True to its socialist orientation, the Derg by and large considered religion as 'the opium of the masses'. It was also fervently nationalist which entailed, among other things, recycling old national (Christian) symbols. Ethiopian historiography was left untouched with its 'unbroken' three-thousand-years-history paradigm (cf. the Solomonic narrative); a historiography still populated by Christian heroes whereas the Islamic heritage of the country was largely silenced. The Derg, however, had inadvertently positive effects on Ethiopian Muslims. By equalizing all religions, the EOC, Protestants, and Muslims all got off from the same starting block at the same time in the post-Derg period, though slowed down by historical baggage.

The regime change in 1991 brought yet another opportunity to redress the issue of religious inequality in Ethiopia. The EPRDF came to power as a champion of minority rights, though its attitude towards the Muslims has changed over time. As part of its project of deconstructing 'imperial' Ethiopia, the EPRDF made connections with various marginalized groups, including Muslims. The 1995 Constitution generously provides for religious rights. Article 11 ensures separation of state and religion; Article 27 ascertains freedom of religion, belief and opinion; Article 29 ascertains the right of thought, opinion and expression and grants freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art or through any media of his choice. Article 31 grants freedom of association; Article 32 allows freedom of movement within and outside the country. These have been translated into the emergence of a confident and assertive Ethiopian Muslim community. Taking advantage of the freedom of movement, Ethiopian Muslims are now better connected with the Islamic World through Hajj and Umra as well as other forms of travel to Muslim countries (Carmichael 1996)6. Freedom of association has meant that Islam in Ethiopia, for the first time, has got a legal organizational expression through any media of its choice. Related to that, the abolition of censorship has meant the flourishing of Islamic literature with a massive translation of works of major global Muslim scholars. Religious equality is expressed in the construction of many mosques, though this has in some areas provoked strong Christian reaction, and liberalization of the press has also meant the emergence of Islamic publishing houses (Hussein 1998; 2006).

Responding to the Muslims' rights movement that centers on inclusive citizenship, EPRDF has also made some historical concessions to Muslims in the form of a greater recognition of the Islamic heritage of the country. As Hussein (2006:13) noted, 'it is a tribute to the open-mindedness of the present government has in the end fulfilled one of the cherished aspirations of Ethiopian Muslims by providing sizeable plots of land and granting permission for the construction of mosques in many parts of the capital. Minarets and glittering domes of newly constructed mosques have further enhanced the visibility and prominence of Islam in the public sphere'. Nevertheless, Muslims still see more continuity than change in religious inequality in Ethiopia despite the religious reforms since 1974. In their perspective the discourse of religious accommodation revives Christian domination whereas the government's discourse of religious tolerance diminishes their rights movements that demands respect and equality from state and society within the Ethiopian polity

## *Historical narratives and political projects*

### *The discourse of religious accommodation – nativism by other means?*

The Orthodox Church has claimed the 'soul' of the Ethiopian nation on the basis of its intimacy with the Ethiopian state until the revolutionary rift between Church and State in 1974 (Tadesse 1972; Abbink 1998). Nearly four decades later, however, the semantic of the Ethiopian nation is still contested by the various religious groups through competing narratives of political entitlement. Throughout the imperial period Muslims were not referred to as Ethiopian Muslims but 'Muslims in Ethiopia' despite the fact that Islam in Ethiopia spread primary through the works of indigenous missionaries. Except for a small trickling of Arab missionaries and traders the bulk majority of the Muslims are indigenous people (Hussein 2006). In fact, with the exception of some groups of the western Nilotes in all ethnic groups there are Muslims. The EOC has lost its economic privileges and political leverage since 1974. Nevertheless, the parameters of national identity are still largely defined in Orthodox terms. As Abbink (1998: 113) noted, 'due to its link with the "divinely ordained" Solomonic monarchy, Christianity inevitably was the core world-view of the political elite and a defining element of nationhood in a historical sense'.

The EOC's claim over the historical 'ownership' of the Ethiopian nation – vividly resuscitated in the slogan 'Ethiopia is an Islam of Christianity' that the Prime Minister referred to in his speech - is currently revived by its neo-conservative wing, the *Mahibere Qidusan.* The following is an

excerpt from the interview I had with two prominent members of the Mahibere Qidusan leadership:

> We wonder why we [EOC] are singled out in the discourse of identification of a nation with a certain faith. Look everywhere and you see the same. Even the largest democracy, the US, is identified with the Protestant Church. Isn't it the case that all American Presidents swear with the bible before they assume office? Isn't it the case that Saudi Arabia will remain a Muslim country no matter how multicultural it becomes? With us it is even different. We have accommodated religious minorities much more than any other country. It is an Axumite (Orthodox) king who protected Muslims when they were persecuted by their own people, though this is not due acknowledged by radical Muslims in contemporary Ethiopia who claim otherwise; that the king who they call Najashi became a Muslim. Who would deny that the EOC is the major contributor in the making of the Ethiopian nation and a repository of its history and values?' (Excerpt from interview with two senior leaders the Mahibere Qidusan August 24, 2010, Addis Ababa).

EOC's historical ownership pf the Ethiopian nation is particularly acted out in the controversy surrounding Muslims' attempt to build a mosque in Axum town, a town which the EOC regards as its sacred space where the Ark of the Covenant is believed to have been hosted. A typical remark members of the EOC and the leadership make on the controversy is 'Muslims should not be allowed to build mosque in Axum so long as Christians are not allowed to build a church in Mecca (EOC 1998).

In the intense religious competition in post 1991 Ethiopia the EOC seeks to mobilize the Ethiopian state by securitizing Islam in geopolitical terms. A recent book by a devout member cum scholar of the EOC, Ephrem Eshete (2008), has revisited Ethiopian history from the perspective of 'Islamic fundamentalism' according to which Muslim historical figures such as Ahmed Gragn are depicted as precursors to the current global Islamic fundamentalist movement.

> The book is a grand research on the current, major problem we all Ethiopians face i.e., Islamic fundamentalism. The core objective of this work is to explore and expose the inroads hitherto fundamentalism has made since the genesis of Islam in the context of Ethiopia. It is fundamentalism exploiting the lukewarm stance of the government for its Islamizing Jihad, and the misty understanding of Christian laity and of fair minded Muslim compatriots. The response from the government is also something we must carefully analyze. Today, there is a clear and imminent jihad wagged in Ethiopia but we are not witnessing measures pertinent enough being taken either by the government or by the laity or by the fair minded Muslims. The government and the EOTC must come directly for an open discussion on the issue (Ephrem 2008 : 2-3).

EOC members at home and in the diaspora have been exhilarated by Ephrem's rendition of the main plot in Ethiopian history. As such they recommend it as a must-read by all Ethiopians, including 'moderate' Muslims and the government:

> Ephrem Eshete clearly reveals the hidden motives of the jihadists in their mission to Islamize history over the question of the creed of Negus (king) Armah. The reason why state media such as ETV presented the king as though he had been a Muslim is another fascinating reading well explained in the book. The book devotes a substantial portion of historical narrations on the pre-Gragn and post Gragn period. Hence, it

> gives us a historical background on Fundamentalist activities and the catastrophe they have brought over Ethiopia. The lesson we learn from this portion of history is the evil potential of Fundamentalism and the unending chaos it can bring[3].

Publicized in words of mouth and in the cyberspace Ephrem Eshete has become a household name among many followers of the EOC. Others are still determined to canonize it as a 'must read' book and as an act of faith: 'Ephrem's book presents the historical crossing of Islam and its followers in Ethiopia from the past till the present time. It explicates the aspiration of fundamental extremism and its evolving strategies, to conquer, along centuries. In short words it marks a new observation in the history of our time. And in my on belief it is a matter that should be incorporated in all the teachings of the Church, Sunday school curriculum or even theological studies. It is a must own and must read book of our time'[4].

The Mahibere Qidusan media outlets and EOC affiliated websites have produced probably more widely read 'historical' books than what academic history has managed to do so. The political motif of all these publications is reestablishing the dominant position the EOC has once occupied, but now doubly pressed by the Muslims, the evangelicals as well as the deconstructionist undercurrents within the EPRDF political system. It presupposes an organic link between faith and nation while externalizing revivalist movements of religious minorities. EOC's hegemonic aspiration is not short of support by 'objective' academic historiography. Medhane (2003:1), for instance, wrote 'religious institutions and inter-religious relations will, in the coming decades, gradually and perhaps inescapably become a thorny issue of national political life and a fundamental source of conflict'. [As a result], the fault lines between religions will be the battle lines of the future in Ethiopia'. Furthermore, Medhane identified the root cause of inter faith conflict in Ethiopia as a rise of particular strands of religious militancy, i.e., the globally situated political Islam (so-called Wahhabism) and the Protestant charismatic movement. The solution which Medhane implicitly proposes is maintaining the status quo which in effect means reinforcing the power of the historically dominant Orthodox Church; 'the historical equilibrium of one dominant religion tolerating the existence of other smaller religions, which has been at the core of peaceful existence, is being dramatically eroded, incubating violent confrontation' (2003:1-2). This political project appears more doable now than in the 1990s when the EPRDF was at the height of its deconstructionist thrust and historical revisionism. The main casualty of EPRDF's deconstructionism was the EOC within which it had appeared as a vestige of the old

[3] http://www.dejeselam.org/2008/12/two-books-on-muslim-fundamentalism.html.

[4]

political order and a bastion of its remnants. At the dawn of the 21st century a lot has changed in EPRDF's own historiography.

***The discourse of religious tolerance – taming the salience of religious identification?***

The politics of EPRDF's discourse of *ye haymanot mechachal* (religious tolerance) is discernable at different levels. It is evident in its understanding of social identity upon which the political structure is built; TPLF's selective memory that greets controversial Tigrean kings with silence; the challenges of religious rights in the wider game of democratic politics, and the dictates of geopolitics that securitizes religion, particularly Islam in Ethiopia. In the following each political dimension of the discourse of religious tolerance is discussed. Ethnicity is the pillar of EPRDF's unique political order known as ethnic federalism. Influenced by Stalin's thesis of the 'nationalities question' the EPRDF has rebuilt the Ethiopian state on an ethnic basis since 1991.

Nowhere else in the world than in Ethiopia that ethnicity has been institutionalized as a principle of social organization and unit of political action. In fact, the authors of the 1995 constitution appear to be ethnic groups according to which political sovereignty resides in the 'nations, nationalities and people' of Ethiopia. Unlike Stalin's definition of the terms which ascribes a quality of social hierarchy in the degree of political entitlement based on stages of 'social development', the distinction among EPRDF's nations, nationalities and peoples is not spelled out. For analytical purpose we can take these three social categories as ethnic groups. Religious communities are not right bearing subjects, though religious right is enshrined in the constitution. In fact, no other form of social identity than ethnicity has a place in the new political structure. In a typically top-down imposition all Ethiopians are expected to fit into an ethnic mould. Even the primacy of national identity is 'politically incorrect', as the controversy during the 1994 census has shown when some people in Addis Ababa wrote their identity as 'Ethiopian' instead of their ethnic identity. The enumerators then forced them to identify only on the basis of their ethnic identity. According to EPRDF's narrative of social identity one is thus an Ethiopian or Ethiopian with an Oromo or Amhara descent but Oromo-Ethiopian or Tigrean-Ethiopian[5].

The primacy of ethnic identity has been contested by various social groups, not least religious groups who demand greater recognition and visibility in the public space and within the political structure. In fact, it is because of the redefinition of what is primary in social identification that many people have signified their religious identity. There have been revivalist movements within

[5] Interview with Meles Zenawi, 2009, www.ethiopiafirst.com

all the major religious groups which have engendered a stiff competition to dominate the country's religious landscape. Operating outside of the purview of the government's rules of the game the EPRDF appears to be politically nervous facing the religious bubble. As such the discourse of religious tolerance not only silences an alternative form of social identification but also externalizes the origin of its salience. According to EPRDF's definition of the situation heightened religiosity and the associated religious conflicts could only be the works of 'destructive forces'.

There is also another political spin in EPRDF's discourse of religious tolerance. EPRDF in general and its dominant political force the TPLF in particular has spilled a lot of ink describing and condemning emperor Menilik for committing the 'original political sin' – the forceful formation of the modern Ethiopian state. This has been associated with the rise of the political power of the Amhara. The process of modern state formation in Ethiopia goes back to the mid 19th century during the reign of the Amhara emperor Tewodros (185501968). Radically departing from the political culture of the medieval Christian kingdom which was a de facto federal entity (Teshale 1995), emperor Tewodros set in the process of building a modern nation state through political centralization and religious homogenization. Tewodros' project of nation state building foundered as it provoked a determined resistance by regional and local political forces against a rigid form of political centralization. His successor, the Tigrean emperor Yohannes IV, reversed Tewodros' project of political centralization and replaced it by what Bahru (2001) calls 'controlled regionalism'. There was however continuity in the idea of nation building, particularly through religious homogenization. In fact, more than the Amhara emperor Tewodros who preceded and emperor Menilik who succeeded him it was emperor Yohannes who vigorously applied the policy of forceful conversion of Muslims into Christianity, particularly in the Wello region. At the council of Borumeda in 1878 emperor Yohannes IV passed a resolution stipulating that Muslims and pagans should renounce their faith and embrace Christianity. Although some Muslim leaders such as Mohammed Ali (Negus Michael) complied with the demand many other put up a strong resistance. To date, neither the EPRDF at the national nor the TPL at the regional level represented emperor Yohannes IV as a villain. In fact, he has been celebrated as a hero in a number of occasions. The Emperor's Memorial Day was, for instance, observed in August 2009 in Tigray region to commemorate his contribution for 'unity and sovereignty' of the country. Besides, the foundation stone of the monument to Emperor Yohannes was laid at the city of Mekelle, and a suggestion was made for the return of his head that was cut off and taken to the Khalifa in Omdurman, Sudan during the battle of Metemma in 1889. Acknowledging the atrocities committed by emperor Yohannes would undermine the demonization of emperor

Menilik, and through him, the Amhara as colonialists par excellence, thus the need for ethnic emancipation in Ethiopia that the TPLF/EPRDF represents. Many scholars have however described the inter-ethnic power relation between the Amhara and the Tigrean elites as a 'sibling rivalry' (Levine 1968; Teshale 1995). It is this essential similarity in political history and political identity that ethno liberation movements such as the OLF and the ONLF refer to while describing the new political system as ethnocracy, a mere change of masters from Amharas to Tigreans who they collectively describe as Habesha. As Bahru noted, the making of the modern Ethiopian state was 'initiated by Tewodros, consolidated by Yohannes and consummated by Menilik'.

EPRDF's discourse of religious tolerance also fits the new reconstructionist political posture it has taken in recent years. As already mentioned, the Ethiopian state, like any other state, looks different while administering it from the centre as resisting it from the periphery where the dominant narrative is often centered on marginalization and victimization. EPRDF has already started toning down ethnicity since 1998 when the war with Eritrea broke out, and like its predecessor the Derg, felt the need to recycle old national symbols to facilitate war mobilization (Toggia 2008: 323-324). By 2000 EPRDF had effectively salvaged the idea of Ethiopia and was ready to defend it against ethno-nationalist liberation movements and opposition voices particularly in Oromia and Somali regional state. The parliamentary debate on whether or not to invade Somalia (the Union of Islamic Courts) in 2006 aptly captured the shifting political discourse of the EPRDF regarding the nature of the Ethiopian state. When Dr Negasso Gidada, a former member of the EPRDF and president of Ethiopia (1995-2002) explained the root cause of the problem between Ethiopia and Somalia as part of the deep-seated crisis of state formation in the Horn of Africa that dates back to king Menilik, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi feverishly responded by invoking a Tigrean saying, that 'the song of the foolish person is always the same'; an interesting remark that Ethiopia has already become a post-Menilik polity. For EPRDF, the UIC and the 'immanent and impending danger' it posed to Ethiopia was a regional manifestation of the globally situated Islamic fundamentalism. A more dramatic change in perspective by the EPRDF regarding Ethiopian history was seen in the events leading to the Ethiopian millennium in 2008 and since. In a speech he delivered at the Millennium hall Prime Minister Meles Zenawi introduced to the Ethiopian public the concept of *hidasse*, the Ethiopian renaissance. According to Meles, the first millennia of Ethiopian history was glorious that produced the genius of the Axumite civilization. The second millennium was a lost millennium when Ethiopia has regressed and deeply seeped into protracted conflicts and ravaged by famine. With the capable leadership of the EPRDF Ethiopia is projected to 'reclaim' the third millennium. EPRDF's new mode of

representing Ethiopian history implicitly refers to the three thousand years history, a history that it was busy deconstructing throughout the 1990s. Mind also the Ethiopian millennium of 2008 is based on the EOC's Julian calendar. It is in fact a historic irony that the greatest challenge to the Ethiopian state has come from Tigray, a region which is the repository of the country's national symbols – from artifacts related to the legendary Queen Sheba, the Axum Zion Church that hosts the Ark of the Covenant, to the battle of Adwa that secured Ethiopia as the only African country to escape colonialism. After all, the overwhelming majority of the population of Tigray region (95.6 %) is members of the EOC with only 4 % Muslims.

The political dimension of the discourse of religious tolerance is also related to the role it plays in the reduction of complexity. Although EPRDF represents the rise of inter-faith tension and violence as the work of 'destructive forces' it is also connected to the emerging rights movement and the inability or unwillingness of the government to respond to the demands. This is particularly true for the Muslims who raise rights issues not only with the dominant Christian population but also with the government. The controversy surrounding the 2007 census; the right for an autonomous and legitimate religious organizations and the right for public manifestation of faith are some of the prominent human right issues Muslims raise in contemporary Ethiopia (see the next section). Most of these religious rights are part of the wider game of democratic politics. As various scholars have noted, EPRDF has had an authoritarian turn in recent years (Aalan and Tronvoll 2008; Clapham 2009; Abbbink 2009; ICG 2009). As such, a government with a strong democratic deficiency could not respond to the rights issues raised by the religious communities. Here again representing Ethiopia's religious past as a model of tolerance and co-existence play the role of delegitimising contemporary demands for rights.

The discourse of religious tolerance has also a geopolitical dimension. 9/11 and the so-called Global War On Terror (GWOT) that followed have tremendously enhanced the strategic significance of the Horn of Africa for western countries (Menkhaus 2008; Schimdt 2009). Closely situated near the volatile Middle East and neighbouring Somalia where political Islam's centre of gravity Islam has shifted to in the 2000s Ethiopia is now defined as an 'anchor state' and a strategic ally to the west (Shinn 2005), or an island of stability in a troubled region. Although the discourse on Islamic terrorism in Ethiopia already started in the mid-1990s in reference to the *Al-Ittihad* Islamic insurgency in the Somali regional state, it is largely a post 9/11 phenomenon. Enthusiastically joining Bush's 'coalition of the willing', EPRDF has positioned itself to gain a new strategic importance in the US-conceived global order. Responding to the new security challenges the US has established counter-terrorism programs in East Africa. The Djibouti-based

Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HoA) is part of US Africa Command for the GWOT (Berouk 2011).

Ethiopia is assigned a key role in GWOT. Militarily the west counts on Ethiopia's largest and one of the most effective armies in Africa which could easily be deployed to defend western interest when the need arises as was the case during Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006. EPRDF also closely cooperates with the US in intelligence gathering on Al-Qaeda cells and other radical organisations in the region. Ethiopia is also one of US's 'black sites', using the country as a base to secretly interrogate undeclared prisoners of GWOT. Outsourcing 'black sites' helps the US avoids criticisms at home by the international human rights groups. The CIA and FBI agents have been interrogating hundreds of detainees suspected of having links with terrorist organisations at secret prisons in Ethiopia.[6]. Ethiopia's large Muslim population and its potential for 'radicalisation' seems to be also a factor in US's politico-military partnership with the EPRDF. For the US 'Ethiopia's approximately 30 million Muslims tie it with Morocco for the eleventh most populous Muslim nation in the world' and that means Ethiopia has more Muslims than Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Iraq, or Afghanistan (USIP 2004: 5). Adapting to and making itself relevant to such a global discourse, the EPRDF has managed to extract tremendous economic resources (development aid) as well as the much needed political legitimacy from the West, despite its poor record on human rights and its political repression, especially after the contested May 2005 election and the post-election violence.[7] EPRDF's discourse of religious tolerance should be situated within this geopolitical context where it plays the role of enhancing Ethiopia's relevance in the new US-led international order by creating links between global discourse of Islamic fundamentalism and religious extremism in Ethiopia, a new development which has even threatened the very existence of '*nebaru Islamina'*, the home-grown Islam, as the Prime Minister put it. In this new geopolitical context, religious rights, especially Muslims', are securitized.

### *Forbearance - The historical framework for citizenship rights?*

The Muslims narratives of the Ethiopian religious past centres on marginalisation and inter-faith conflict. Muslims do acknowledge the religious reforms since the 1974 revolution and more so since 1991. They give due credit to the EPRDF for further redressing the Muslims demands for

[6] See 'Outsourced Guantanamo'–FBI & CIA Interrogating Detainees in Secret Ethiopian Jails. http://www.democracynow.org/2007/4/5/outsourced_guantanamo_fbi_cia_interrogating_detainees

[7] See Human Right Watch reports on Ethiopia in 2008; 2009, and 2010.

citizenship rights. Nevertheless, they still have some outstanding grievances against the dominant Christian population and the EPRDF government. As Hussein (2006) noted, examples of Christians-Muslims peaceful co-existence and cooperation abound, as it has rarely been seen elsewhere in the world. But contemporary Muslims understate this part of Christian-Muslims relations in their representation of Ethiopian history. The marginalisation and domination plot in Muslims historiography is elaborated in a recent book written in Amharic by Ahmedin Jebal (2011), a well known activist for Muslims rights. Entitled, *Ethiopian Muslims: A History of Domination and resistance*, the book has been an instant celebrity. It is widely read by Muslims at home and in the diaspora, evident in the publication of already a second edition of the book in less than three months. Like Ephrem Eshete's book – *Islamic Fundamentalism in Ethiopia*, Ahmedins's book is hailed as a must-read book[8].

The marginalisation and domination historical plot play the role of highlighting the structural continuity of religious inequality whereas the government's discourse of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence appears to diminish the legitimacy of the demands. In other words, the representation of the past with an accent on domination and intolerance provides historical legitimacy to the contemporary political struggles. The resistance plot, on the other hand, seeks to reinforce the political agency of Muslims' in contemporary political struggles through a reference to historical precedence. Muslims raise a wide variety of rights issues in contemporary Ethiopia. Firstly, they demand for greater historical and physical space. Although the Islamic heritage of Ethiopia is by far recognised now than ever before Muslims are concerned that EPRDF's nationalist turn could ultimately undermine the hard-won gains. Many 'objective' historians still represent Ahmed Gragn as 'destructive' as if his Christian counterparts were 'peaceful' in the military campaigns they had waged against the Islamic principalities. Muslims historical thrust here is not even contextualising and historicising the wars of Ahmed Gragn but recognise him as a 'freedom fighter'. Muslims also claim a greater physical space for Islam in Ethiopia commensurate with the larger demographic size. They vehemently reject the 2007 census according to which Muslims constitute only 34 % of the country's population. In their perspective Muslims are at least 50%, if not more. The contest over the census has a direct bearing on land claims for the construction of houses of worship. In a more emotionally loaded sense they particularly ask for the construction of mosques in the EOC dominated northern town such as Axum and Lalibela. The EOC claims these towns as its sacred place. Axum Muslims, who constitute 14 % of the town's population, are still not allowed to build a mosque within 15

[8] Nejashi OJ. Campaign to know our history and let others know it. http://blog.ethiopianmuslims.net, April 28, 2011.

km radius of the town. The right to build a mosque in Axum, a town which Muslims also regard as 'sacred' as the land of the Najashi, is one of the contentious issues in Christian-Muslims relation in contemporary Ethiopia.

The most contentious issue between Muslims and the EPRDF government is the legitimacy of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (Mejlis). The leadership of the Mejlis is tightly controlled by the government under the pretext of containing a take over by Islamic fundamentalists. Moves towards the formation of alternative Islamic organisations have also been blocked by the Mejlis. As a result, many Muslims do not recognise the Mejlis as their organisation and this has denied Muslims a functional organisation which they have been yearning for to enhance Islam's standing in the country's religious landscape. Lack of a legitimate and functional organisation has also weakened an Islamic voice that could effectively contest EPRDF's assertive secularism. The EPRDF issues a secular directive in 2008 that banned the wearing of hijab and niqab and collective prayer in educational institutions[9]. Although the directive applies for all religious groups Muslims have perceived it as directed against Islam, as other religious groups are not as prescriptive in religious conduct as Islam is. Protesting the ban many Muslims University students clashed with the government throughout 2009, an event which reminded Muslims the historic continuity of their marginalisation, whereas the government interpreted it as signs of Islamic radicalisation.

In this political struggle between Muslims and Christians, and between Muslims and the EPRDF government, the Muslims have sought to establish a historical basis of legitimacy. The focus is on the Najashi narrative, a narrative which is functional at various layers of the confrontation. What I call the Najashi narrative refers to the strong Ethiopian component in early Islam – the First Hijra; Najashi as the first ruler outside of Arabia to embrace Islam; the two leading Ethiopian companions of the prophet Mohammad (Bilal Ibn Rabah -Islam's first Muezzin-and Umm Ayman Baraka -the prophet's care-taker), and the representation of Ethiopia in the Islamic scripture and literature as the land of righteousness. At one level the Najashi narrative serves the purpose of repositioning the Ethiopian Muslims vis a vis national identity. Accordingly, Ethiopia is not only a special country for the Christians it is also vital for the Muslims of the world in general and the Ethiopian Muslims in particular. Construed this way, goes the Najashi narrative, Islam owes Ethiopia big time to its very survival. The hospitality and the tolerance the sahaba got in Ethiopia is said to be 'critical' for the survival and expansion of Islam. Ethiopian Muslims would have less trouble in identifying with Ethiopia as the 'land of the First Hijra' than the

[9] Ethiopian Ministry of Education Directive on Secularism in educational institutions, Addis Ababa, 2008.

'Ethiopia is an island of Christianity' variety. Commenting on this new representation of Ethiopia one of my Muslim informants from Addis Ababa said, 'it is for the first time that we Ethiopian Muslims started reconciling being Muslim and being Ethiopian. For our forefathers reconciling both sounded a contradiction in terms'. Tracing the history of Islam in Ethiopia to king Najashi thus helps Muslims to negotiate their 'foreignness', a new foundation myth in reconstructing a national identity. In the communiqué it made on April 12, 2009 on the growing inter-faith tension, the Network of Ethiopian Muslims in Europe (NEME), for instance, contested the EOC's claim of indignity while asserting Islam's long presence in Ethiopia in the following manner:

> It is to be noted that the Ethiopian state preceded all the Abrahamic religions. Well before the introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia in the 4th A.D the Axumite had already built a sophisticated non-Christian civilization. Like Christianity, Islam was also introduced to Ethiopia from the Middle East at the same time it was being established in Saudi Arabia. Any ownership claim of the Ethiopian state and its history is thus not only ahistorical but also poses danger to the peace and security of the country. Instead of engaging in the fruitless debate on first-comer/late-comer we should combat all forms of religious extremism and build our common nation.

The political sub-text of the Najashi narrative is therefore a secure sense of national belonging and a historical framework for citizenship right. A reference to the First Hijra is often made by Muslims in the sense of meaning 'we have been around the Ethiopian block for a long time', however marginalized they have been. Historical longevity is invoked to counter the securitization of Islam in Ethiopia that stipulates as if revivalist movements could only have external referents.

Within the Umma (a universal Islamic identity) the Najashi narrative enables the Ethiopian Muslims to claim a special status. Like in all forms of collective identities there is also the issue of authenticity in Islamic identification. Many black Muslims face social discrimination during their pilgrimage to Mecca or in other forms of encounter. As one of my Muslim informants noted,

> We need the Najashi story in order to show off with other Muslims particularly the Arabs. The Arabs misidentify Islam with Arab nationalism. They look down particularly upon black Muslims. Many Ethiopian students from Saudi Arabia and Egypt had bitter experience of discrimination. In circumstances such as this we are keen in reminding the Arabs that Ethiopia and Ethiopians are intimately connected with the Prophet Mohammed and Islam from early on'[10].

In this layer of confrontation the Najashi narrative becomes a discursive resource to justify a status claim. Ethiopian Muslims are thus not just one among the many black Muslims occupying

[10] Despite their Islamic activism, northern Sudanese Muslims, for instance, are also derogatorily referred to as abids (slaves) as migrant laborers in the Gulf States and in the Middle East. Field note, Khartoum, 2002.

a lower position in Islamic identification but Muslims with a special access to the Islamic great tradition. Contemporary Ethiopian Muslims also refer to the First Hijra as a catalyst and justification for integration within the wider Islamic world. This is not only a discourse of belonging to an Islamic identity but also used as a discourse to extract economic resources from the Islamic world. The double facility of the Najashi narrative to the reconstruction of religious and national identities is succinctly depicted in the document the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora delegation wrote and presented to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2007:

> Although we do not have a conclusive evidence to claim that Ethiopia is the first country to grant asylum to the persecuted we understand that Najashi could have well set precedence for the contemporary human right conventions that include protection of the vulnerable and the persecuted. What makes Ethiopia unique in the annals of Islamic history is that the Muslim refugees had lived peacefully with other Ethiopians and this was the basis for the flourishing of Islam in the country to the level it has reached now. King Asmha's acceptance of Islam makes Ethiopia not only a land of justice and enlightenment but also the first country where Islam got recognition by a head of state (The Document: 9).

The diaspora delegation presented a summary of Muslims human rights issues to the Prime Minister, from the controversial census, the autonomy of the Mejlis, the right to build Mosques in Axum, a balanced media, public manifestation of faith, to a historical justification for the membership of Ethiopia in the Organization of Islamic Conference. History here serves as a legitimating framework for basically political rights. Although the delegation was warmly welcomed by the EPRDF its mission was construed as if it were to give color to the Millennium celebration, once again sending message to Muslims that there are limits to Islam in Ethiopia.

## *Conclusion*

Nationalist history has been the main thrust of academic historiography in Ethiopia up until 1991 with the dominant historical plots of unification, independence and peaceful co-existence (Toggai 2008). The contestation over Ethiopian history has reached its zenith since 1991. As Samir (2010: 171) recently noted, 'narratives about Ethiopia's "long" history, its "independence" and "heroes", its "intimate" and "unified" peoples, its "sacred" geography and "common" culture are all laid open to increasingly reckless counter-hegemonic storms'. The paper has examined three historiographies about Ethiopia's religious past; two by religious communities and a state historiography. The historiography of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church closely resembles the nationalist historical paradigm that stipulates an uninterrupted three thousand years of national existence with the dominant Orthodox Church accommodating religious minorities. Accordingly, inter-faith relations have been always harmonious and peaceful, save some exceptions when

religious minorities such as Muslims were incited and reeked havoc to the national fabric. The hitherto religious minorities have contested the EOC's hegemonic knowledge production that has silenced, ignored and distorted subaltern voices in the radically changed socio-political contexts. Demographically the second largest and politically more assertive, Muslims have particularly in the forefront in this counter-hegemonic project. Expectedly, history has become one of the main sites of political contestation. What has passed as religious accommodation is now redefined by Muslims as 'forbearance' of the politically dominant EOC, i.e., a power-mediated tolerance of intolerance. As such, the dominant historical plots in the emerging Muslims' historiography are marginalisation, domination and resistance. Ethiopia's 'glorious' religious past looks quite different when written with these new meta-narratives. Like EOC's historiography Muslims historiography has also ignored some 'inconvenient' facts that threaten to undermine the coherent stories it seeks to tell.

EPRDF's state historiography significantly differs from preceding Ethiopian governments' with its strong deconstructionist dose, though the tone has changed in recent years towards selectively appropriating from the nationalist historiography. EPRDF has grown impatient with the rise of religion - in lie of the state sanctioned ethnicity - as a major focus of social identification and unit of framing rights claims in that it has already redressed all forms of inequality, and in fact Muslims are supposed to be one of the main beneficiaries. The redress is said to have built a more cohesive political community (a reformed Ethiopian polity) and the focus now should be building a common economic community. In fact, EPRDF's main basis of political legitimacy is now shifting away from identity politics to the language of development, a regime which needs to stay on power not for its emanicipatory project but rather for the 'double digit economic growth' it claims to have registered. This is the new political context within which EPRDF's temptation to recycle Ethiopia's 'Great' traditions and the nationalist historiography be embedded. One of these 'Great traditions' is Ethiopia as a model of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. At the last instance, therefore, the competing popular and the new state historiographies in Ethiopia are as much about the present and shaping the future as they are about understanding of the past.

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