

East Africa
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A perennial issue in the comparative study of Islam is how, as a faith and a way of life, it deals with diversity: religious, ethnic, or socio-cultural. This issue is all the more relevant in a world where globalizing discourses redefine traditional identities, including those of religious systems, both in their local (indigenous Asian and African) and universalist forms (Christianity, Islam). In many areas, complex and, in a way, exemplary patterns of mutual interaction and tolerance have developed between religious-communal groups. In Africa, such regions are found in Mali, Cameroon, Tanzania, Nigeria, and also Ethiopia. The history and current situation of Islam in Ethiopia, especially the northern part of the country, provide an interesting case study.

The situation of Islam in Ethiopia is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, there is its long history in the country (see Trimmingham 1952; Hussein 1994). It is well-known that since the beginning of the new faith, before the Prophet Muhammad had even established himself in Mecca, a number of his followers were received in Ethiopia as religious asylum-seekers at the court of Aksum (615 CE). On the authority of the Prophet, Ethiopia was not to be targeted for jihad. In the subsequent period, Islam expanded in the country largely through peaceful means, and since the late 18th century especially through Sufi orders (Qadiriyya). This ancient history plays a role in the self-definition of Ethiopian Muslims. One historical episode is an exception to this pattern: the violent confrontation between the Christian empire and the Islamic sultanates of Ifat and Adal in the 16th century (c. 1520-1550), where, mainly as a result of Turkish assistance (e.g., fire-arms) and strong leadership, and zeal of the self-declared imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim of Harar, the Christian state and its religious culture were almost annihilated in an unprecedented jihad.

Secondly, there is the complex relationship between ethnicity and Islam. Ethiopia knew virtually no Arab immigration, and Ethiopian Muslims belonged to the indigenous peoples, retaining much of their specific ethno-cultural characteristics, so that these often overshadowed 'Islamic identity' (This phenomenon is familiar from other countries as well). Arabic was not a spoken

Muslim traders at the market in Vemis, Northern Ethiopia



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language among any group, and there were no Arab traditions related to marriage, inheritance, and other related customs, imported into Ethiopia. Shari'a law was always very partially applied and combined with the customary law of a region or of a dominant ethnic group.

Thirdly, Islam in Ethiopia always lived in the shadow of an old and powerful Christian kingdom (except in the violent period just mentioned). Christianity was the core world-view of the political elite and a defining element of the country's historical nationhood, and up to the demise of the monarchy in 1974, Muslims were excluded from this. They hence held a secondary place in the political and civic domains; there was a politically relevant 'boundary' between the two communities of faith.

While effective in the collective sense, in the realities of daily life this boundary was, however, not immutable. It did not prohibit social interaction in areas where Christians, Muslims and others – though following their own dietary and ritual rules – lived side by side and intermingled. The boundary could also be crossed by individuals changing allegiance and changing their identity.

Ambiguous identities?

It is this domain of boundary (crossing), in a social and religious sense, which offers an interesting entry to the study of Islamic lore and practice in Ethiopia. Muslims and Christians live together in many places and know each other intimately; they are masters of adaptation and improvisation in a precarious natural and political environment where knowledge of, and personal relations with, power-holders are crucial, but at the same time volatile and subject to unpredictable changes. Especially in parts of Northern Ethiopia where the numerical balance between Christians and Muslims was virtually equal and where the social conditions (poverty, land scarcity, lack of access to 'political resources') were the same for both groups, religious identity was made a strategic factor in the social careers of persons, related to marriage, trade, migration to a city or an area predominantly inhabited by members adhering to the other religion, or ethnic or political affiliation. People thus tended to choose what communal identity in what phase of their lives was best for them. In Northern Ethiopia (e.g. Wällo) this has led to long-standing patterns of conversion and re-conversion between the two faiths and explains the existence of extended families that are half-Muslim and half-Christian. Most importantly, people showed a tolerant and forgiving attitude in accommodating the variable identities and religious practices that others resort to and were not quick to judge others. This pattern is maintained until today.

This phenomenon of what could be called religious oscillation has not been studied systematically but is nonetheless of great interest. It shows not only the varied forms that Islamic religious culture can take in an African context, but also leads us to inquire into the nature of (Islamic and Christian) religiosity and into conditions of co-existence and non-exclusivist identification on the ba-

sis of religions usually held to be absolutist and – in the case of Islam – 'officially' not tolerating conversion to another faith.

The situation of co-existence and intermingling is not unique in itself; in other areas both in Africa and Europe, members of the two faiths worked out understandings and shared in each others' lives during festivals and religious occasions, though observing certain minimal rules in the process, e.g. not eating meat from animals slaughtered by people of the other faith.

Christians and Muslims: tolerance and exchange

It was often said by Ethiopian and other observers that Muslims (and Christians) in Northern Ethiopia only have a 'superficial adherence to their faith' and that they are not 'true believers' or are 'opportunists'. This may sometimes be the case, but in this the people concerned are no different from the countless others who do not shift their religion: can these always be said to be 'true believers'? Neither does this reproach do justice to the feelings of the people concerned and to their own way of dealing with religious values. It only holds when one applies an exclusivist interpretation of 'religiosity' and of Islam. The non-literate 'folk Islam' in Northern Ethiopia with its veneration of saints and shrines, its festivals or its specific prayer sessions perhaps goes against the grain of strict Islamic ulema doctrine, especially when seen in its ritual aspects. But it has been an identity based on other precepts of Islam, deemed more important by the local people. Little research has been done on how these practices of (re)conversion and co-existence are being worked out in daily practice and what the socio-political implications are. What is clear from a few interesting pioneer MA theses by Ethiopian social science students at Addis Ababa University, who have looked into these matters (e.g. Assefa 1992, Kalklachew 1997), is that local Ethiopian society shows an active religious commitment on the part of its people, based on a principled tolerance and mutual understanding. When a Muslim man's daughter marries a Christian, she is not ostracized or condemned by him, and when a Christian person's brother converts to Islam in order to facilitate his marriage to a Muslim girl, contacts are not broken off. Mixed Christian-Muslim participation in certain pilgrimages and their joint veneration of saints is not frowned upon. These practices make up the unique pattern of life in Northern Ethiopia, and as such form somewhat of a model for inter-communal relations in a plural society.

In recent years, especially after the 1991 change of government in Ethiopia, such patterns of tolerance in Wällo and elsewhere have come under stress. Revivalist movements (e.g., of Wahhabite persuasion) are emerging and are targeting traditional folk Islamic practices in Northern Ethiopia. As the anthropologist Kelklachew (1997: 99) ironically noted, the representatives of this movement (especially active in the towns) '... criticize everything that the Muslims of the area perceive as Islamic practice'. During fieldwork in the area I also heard some peo-

ple say that their village had been visited by persons asking them to 'reduce their contacts and cooperation with the Christians' and 'reinforce the Muslim character' of their village. The villagers however did not see the problem and refused the message.

Hence, in the face of Islamic revivalism based on strict scriptural interpretations, the challenge of pluralism presents itself anew in Ethiopia (There is no such movement amongst Christians, who do not discourage contacts with the Muslims). A moot point is whether Islamic revivalism – and perhaps a Christian response which may eventually emerge – will articulate 'boundaries' where there were none before, or upset the balance and tolerance between communal groups. From various recent examples in Africa and the Balkans, we know that gruesome violence can be evoked in such a situation. These questions are also raised in Ethiopia. The answers given by most of the local population in Wällo is that they have worked out practical solutions to religious and cultural diversity, and that an emphasis on a strictly scriptural interpretation of the faith at the expense of folk religion would serve no purpose if the historical patterns of tolerance and accommodation would be reversed. Their example shows that there are more ways than one of being a good believer. ♦

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