

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, HERITAGE AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Religious Pluralism, Heritage and Social Development in Africa

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While heritage is about the past, namely the traditions and practices passed on from generation to generation, and the locations and material culture that provide identity for communities, nations, and humanity in general, its public recognition and appropriation are very much a matter of the present. With the broadening of the scope of the concept in recent years to include intangible as well as tangible heritage, immaterial as well as material culture, moveable as well as unmovable objects, natural environments and heritage locations of religious interest,¹ it presented itself as a productive, timely, and culturally relevant topic for the African Consortium for Law and Religion Studies, most especially in the context of Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is internationally known for its rich cultural heritage, with sites such as Axum, Lalibela, and Gondar proving central to the country's tourist industry. Seven of Ethiopia's heritage sites have received the imprimatur of UNESCO World Heritage status. The question of cultural heritage in Africa more generally, particularly heritage of religious and spiritual interest, needs to be understood at multiple levels, whether local, national, or international. It also necessitates a range of approaches that address its definition, creation, conservation, management, mobilisation and commodification in the African context. Any one or combination of these areas could have legal implications.

As noted by a leading African scholar of world heritage and development in sub-Saharan Africa, Webber Ndoro, African voices and perspectives in shaping heritage legislation and commemoration have frequently been underrepresented and in fact may be at odds with the "precepts of preservation espoused by UNESCO and its expert groups from the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature".² He argues that international experts tend to overemphasise certain aspects of heritage such as architectural monuments, archaeological sites of ancient civilisations, and historic sites, while "failing to recognize others that are important to the African traditional definition of heritage, such as those related to African traditional religions, slavery, or colonial resistance".³ Another contentious issue in his view is the need to reconcile heritage conservation with socio-economic development around resource exploitation. He discusses how the development- and energy-oriented projects that African governments frequently promote "have come into conflict with the prospects for protecting

1 See the UNESCO Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest. Online at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/religious-sacred-heritage>

2 Ndoro W. 2017. "World Heritage and Development in Sub-Saharan Africa", *American Anthropologist* 119(1):129.

3 Ndoro, "World Heritage and Development", 129.

and conserving World Heritage Sites".⁴ Other negative factors in the case of Africa include illegal activities, civil unrest, war and deliberate destruction of heritage. There are, however, signs, according to Ndoro, of greater awareness by African state parties of the 1972 World Heritage Convention and more visible actors on World Heritage issues at the local level.

Thus, it was not insignificant that the main conference theme on law, religion and heritage in Africa also included social development. For perceptions and appropriations of sacred histories, artifacts and heritage sites can be instrumental or antithetical to the goals of development and nation-building in Africa. As many of the essays in this volume demonstrate, attention to these questions provides much needed perspectives on the local dynamics of diverse African contexts. They also confirm the merits of the interdisciplinarity afforded by the fields of law and religion studies, with their attention to the sub-fields of education, media, and tourism, for example, where understandings of heritage can be naturalised and commodified.

Several of the chapters also attest to the value of considering the potential of national heritage policy and legislation to affirm or destabilise religion-state and/or interreligious relations in African states. Heritage should be viewed in relation to national, cultural, and global citizenship, as well as freedom of religion or belief. Preservation laws may be instrumental in shaping standards of authenticity, antiquity and aesthetics, which, in turn, may have consequences for the incorporation of religious, especially indigenous, perspectives in African settings. Sacred objects, symbols, and sites can be legitimated or delegitimated through heritagisation processes. As David Chidester has shown for South Africa, the political mobilisation of heritage can provide, sometimes controversial, opportunities for memorialising the past and recognising Africa's indigenous peoples.⁵ The negative influence of more revivalist forms of Christianity and Islam in many parts of contemporary Africa in this regard is also noted by several of the contributors. In sum, this timely publication brings new research and fresh perspectives on the legal and development ramifications of cultural and religious heritage for Africa and its peoples.

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4 Ndoro, "World Heritage and Development", 130.

5 Chidester D. 2012. *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

INTRODUCTION

“Religious Pluralism, Heritage and Social Development” – at the fourth annual African Consortium for Law and Religion Studies (ACLARS) held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the concept of heritage was truly at the centre. Heritage – what it is, who decides, and how to preserve it – is a theme that is not only garnering interdisciplinary attention around the world, but also one that, if attended to well, can harness Africa’s rich pluralism of religions and cultures in service of broader social, political and even economic development. The essays in this year’s conference book illustrate this point in diverse ways.

Ethiopia was an extraordinarily rich site for holding a conference on heritage, as it is the site of some of the oldest communities of three world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Last year’s conference book on religious freedom and religious pluralism concluded with three strong chapters by Ethiopian authors, and this year’s publication similarly begins with a trio of Ethiopian essays describing the ways in which heritage both complicates and is sustained by religious freedom and religious pluralism. Mohammed Dejen Assen’s chapter provides a critical examination of the Ethiopian heritage narrative of religious tolerance and the way in which this narrative has been sustained particularly from Muslim forbearance from resistance and accommodation to the status quo. Serawit Debele’s chapter explores how the rituals associated with a nature-based thanksgiving Irreecha ritual of the Oromo people has been “cul-touristically” appropriated by the secular Ethiopian state in service of the tourism industry. This has occurred against a backdrop of historical dominance by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, in ways that have defined the ritual as culture in a way that has despiritualised its meaning. Her essay thus focuses on heritage as both process and discourse. Theodros Teklu’s chapter describes the relationship among religions in Ethiopia, like Assen’s essay, taking up the narratives of marginalisation and victimisation of Ethiopian Muslims and emphasising the need for a moral pedagogy of “cohabitation”, rather than tolerance, to promote both plurality and responsibility in the heritage of religions among religious “others”.

From Ethiopia, the volume moves to consider the implications for heritage of relations between religion and state in three very distinct national contexts. The chapter of Abamfo Atiemo and John Esubonteng uncovers the history of the Baptist Church heritage in Ghana, particularly the way that Ghanaian Baptists created a distinctly Ghanaian Baptist tradition, rooted in Africa and separate from the history of influence by American church missionaries. Prosper Muzambi explores the use of religion and the Bible as sources of political legitimisation by Grace Mugabe, the spouse of long-term Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe, in the context of Zimbabwe’s ongoing definition of

the concept of citizenship. Jean-Baptiste Sourou examines the establishment, in 1997, of 10 January as a national day in the Republic of Benin for the celebration of traditional religions. This had significant roots in the Ouidah 92 festival reuniting Africans and Africans in America, but was controversial, too, for lifting up traditional religions as a site of Benin's African heritage – despite the apparent blessing of Pope John Paul II of African religious traditions in his notable engagement with the African continent.

A duo of essays explores the contribution of Islam to Africa's religious and legal heritage, followed by additional essays on the particular struggles of indigenous and minority religions. Ahmed Garba's essay examines the position of Nigeria's Shia Muslim community in the face of a law proposed that would place bans on religious preaching. Hassan Ndzovu's essay analyses the history of constitutional wrangling in Kenya over the status of Muslim Kadhi Courts and how this debate illustrates that religion and politics, religion, and the state remain deeply intertwined despite constitutionally professed secularism.

From a specific focus on African Islam, the essays then shift to examinations of Africa's diverse traditional religions and of the plight of minority religions, more generally. Writing about Côte d'Ivoire, Célestin Gnonzion provides a remarkable heritage-infused analysis of media coverage of religion through the trope of the *glaè* mask worn by leaders of the Wê people as a symbol of the unity of political power and religious authority. It is a relationship in which the former unity of political and religious leadership in the *glaè* has given way in the contemporary Ivorian context to a situation in which religious leaders, particularly the Catholic bishops, have been publicly criticised for refusing to exercise their power in challenging the state in a prophetic way. Nokuzola Mndende's essay examines how the juxtaposition of modern individual rights and traditional collective rights in the South African Xhosa community, and in other parts of Africa causes today's Africans to inhabit dual worlds, but with the collectivity of the African tradition manifest even in the most basic language of everyday greetings. Abdulkader Tayob provides an analysis of South Africa's ongoing debate over its National Religious Education Policy (NPRE), and how religious diversity in schools has been manifested – and highly scrutinised by the courts – particularly in the religious practices and bodies of girls.

A particular set of heritage questions is presented by the connection of indigenous groups to land, water, and local monuments, and is the focus of the essays contained in the volume's next part. Fortune Sibanda's essay on Rastafarian land use practices showcases not only the Rastafarian reverence for the earth, but also its profound interconnection to dietary, medicinal, and spiritual practices of the Rastafarian tradition. Equally important to land in Africa, as elsewhere, is proper management of the water resources that flow above and below it. Bernard Humbe's discussion of water use practices in Zimbabwe shows how central water and its management are to the spiritual practices of the indigenous Shona people, and how these practices have been

affected by pre-colonial and postcolonial laws that took water rights away from the indigenous people in ways that threaten their spiritual practices, their ecology of sustainability, and even resources for peace and conflict reconciliation – all of which derive from their connection to and management of water resources. Edmore Dube’s essay, the third in this Zimbabwean trilogy, examines policies surrounding the management of the Great Zimbabwe monuments, and how these policies, too, have involved disjuncture from systems of local management that are key to the monuments’ physical and cultural preservation.

The book’s next section focuses on controversies to do with religion, hate speech, diversity and equality. Damaris Parsitau provides a moral and ethical assessment of the sociological reality of Kenya’s proliferating Pentecostal and charismatic churches, many of which stand accused of emotional and financial exploitation of followers, who seek solace in these ministries to deal with a welter of problems affecting contemporary Kenyan society. Johan van der Vyver takes up the important question of hate speech, in a comparative analysis of African laws prohibiting offence to religious feelings. These occupy a notably different terrain in a South Africa constitutionally committed to fostering equality in diversity than they do in the United States where “free speech” is given much wider latitude. Diversity and equality are also central concerns in Georgia du Plessis’s chapter on the controversy over colonial monuments exemplified in the “Rhodes Must Fall” that spread across South African universities, as well as to Oxford University in the U.K. This is, indeed, a global phenomenon that has also manifested strongly in the United States, where universities and municipalities, particularly in light of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, have raised questions about monuments to the Confederate leaders whose move to secede prompted the U.S. Civil War in the nineteenth century. These “monumental” questions are deeply implicated in peoples’ and nations’ ongoing politics of identity, recognition, memory, and reconciliation. Questions of diversity and equality are also raised in stark form today by debates over homosexuality, homosexual relationships, and same-sex language. The subject of prohibitory laws in many African nations, the dignity and equality of LGBT people, and the relationships and families that they form was recognised in South Africa in the decision in the *Minister of Home Affairs v. Fourie* case. Judge Sachs’s decision in the *Fourie* case is analysed through the lens of Protestant Reformation leader Martin Luther’s essay “The Freedom of a Christian” in the chapter of Elias Bongmba, who provides a theological argument for recognition of dignity, equality, and the “right to be different” in the African context.

The book ends where all life ends, namely the social and spiritual reality of death, and the laws that we make to address it. Chapters by Helena van Coller and Dineo Skosana take up the regulation of death and burial in the South African National Heritage Resource Act (NHRA). Skosana argues that the NHRA, in seeking to protect the “tangible heritage” of monuments, graves and burial sites, does not sufficiently protect the “intangible heritage” of indigenous

beliefs and practices around death, because it permits and does not sufficiently compensate indigenous people for incidents of grave disturbance. Van Collier discusses these issues from the perspective of law, arguing that indigenous communities should avail themselves of religious rights arguments, alongside claims of property rights, to claim their rights to burial places and practices that are often poorly understood by law. From South Africa, the chapters then move to Nigeria and Zimbabwe. Danoye Oguntola-Laguda, employing a blend of religious, legal, and sociological analysis, examines objections of Nigerian Muslim communities in Lagos State to a proposed Coroner Law System (CLS) whose prescriptions regarding postmortem autopsies were seen to conflict with Islamic burial practice. The case study is used to shed further light on the state of religious pluralism in Nigeria. In the volume's concluding chapter Tobias Marevesa and Fortune Sibanda provide an Afrocentric argument against the death penalty, particularly as imposed in pre-colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe.

The topic of heritage – situated between, drawing upon, and contributing to Africa's religious pluralism and development – was an important topic for ACLARS to take up at this time. It has taken us into a realm of anthropological, political, and policy-laden topics that have not been heretofore addressed in the halls of ACLARS conferences, but in continuity with questions of religious freedom and human rights that have been our organisational hallmark. What and who constitute heritage? What forms of tangible and intangible heritage count? How can minority religious heritages be preserved amidst the at times homogenising and hegemonising forces of the majority? How is law, with its normative power to shape society, involved in “authorising heritage discourses”?

With rapidly developing societies, but also rapid technological developments in our abilities to preserve and curate heritage for our own and future generations, these questions are of great religious, legal, and cultural significance today. In the back of the minds of the organisers of our Ethiopia conference was the specter of ISIS blowing up the great monuments of Syrian civilisation, particularly the ruins of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage Centre site. Along with the explosion of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan and the sacking and desecration of Iraq's museum and antiquities treasures in the last decade's wars, the destruction of heritage looms as a unique form of cultural genocide directed at past, present, and future. And yet Africans have loomed large as heritage heroes in recent years, as in the salvation of some of the world's greatest manuscripts from terrorist attacks in the ongoing conflict in Mali, as recounted in the recent and robustly named book, *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu*.¹ Our exploration of the many dimensions of African heritage from the vantage points of law and religion will, we hope, be a contribution to heritage debates and to

1 Hammer J. 2016. *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

efforts to prevent heritage atrocities on the African continent and beyond. For as the Timbuktu librarians illustrate – not to mention the magnificent heritage sites at Lake Tana, Gondar, Lalibela, and Axum that some of us were privileged to visit after the Ethiopian conference – heritage preservation is clearly an area in which Africa can lead!

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I. Religion, Pluralism and Heritage in Ethiopia

1 RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN ETHIOPIA: RHETORIC AND REALITY

Mohammed Dejen Assen¹

INTRODUCTION

In academia, especially of Christian writers of Ethiopian religious history, contemporary politicians and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), there seems to be a general consensus that Ethiopia's religious past is characterised by peaceful coexistence and tolerance between Muslims and Christians.² Although partly true, the emphasis only on the consensual aspect of the relations not only distorts the conflictual relations,³ but also undermines contemporary claims of Muslims for more parity and freedom, as the government and Christians associate their claims with religious intolerance and extremism. The author of this chapter subscribes to the general assertion of peaceful coexistence and tolerance, noting however that it was largely attributable to the forbearance of Muslims and the acceptance of the status quo with no or minimal resistance. Whenever Muslims become assertive in political and economic affairs of the state, their relations with the state and Christians deteriorate.

This chapter examines the religious history of the country in relation to the tolerance and forbearance narratives advanced by the Christians and Muslims respectively. In doing so, the first part of the chapter highlights the religious demography of the country by focusing on Islam and Christianity. The second section will deal with the conflicting narratives of Ethiopia's religious past mainly drawn from the Muslim and Christian perspectives. The third part provides a conceptual framework of tolerance and forbearance in the Ethiopian context and explains the Ethiopian experience of religious coexistence. It also discusses the various discourses of religious coexistence advanced by different sets of actors. Finally, it examines contemporary trends of religious (in)tolerance and appraises some of the policies of the government towards religion.

1 The author is an assistant professor at Addis Ababa University, College of Law and Governance Studies.

2 For the purpose of this chapter, Christianity is to mean only Orthodox Tewahedo Christianity of Ethiopia. It does not include Protestantism, Catholicism and other denominations of Christianity as they were excluded from the benefits that the Ethiopian state provided for Orthodox Tewahedo Christians. According to the 2007 population census, Protestants comprise about 18.6% of the religious figure of Ethiopia and Catholics are around 0.7%.

3 Hussein A. 2006. "Coexistence and/or Confrontation? Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36(Fasc.1):4-22.

THE RELIGIOUS MAP OF ETHIOPIA

Orthodox Christianity

Based on the population and housing census of 2007,⁴ Orthodox Christianity constitutes 43.5% of the total number of the religious composition of the Ethiopian people. Their number decreased roughly by 7% from the 1994 census results.⁵ Ethiopia was the first country in Africa to host Christianity. It entered the country in the middle of the fourth century CE⁶ through the “two brothers, Frumentius and Aedesius [of Syria]”,⁷ which makes Ethiopia the third country in the world to adopt Christianity after Constantinople and Armenia.⁸ King Ezana, the Axumite King, who was believed to be the first convert to Christianity, established the religion at the state level. A political scientist and historian, John Markakis states that Orthodox Christianity was introduced in the country after the Monophysite doctrine was “condemned as a heresy” by the Catholic Church at the religious Council of Chalcedon. Some groups subscribing to this dogma fled to Axum from the Church of Alexandria, from where the Ethiopian Church used to import Patriarchs until 1959. Those who came to Axum include the nine saints from Syria who later translated the Bible into Ge’ez.⁹ As Markakis noted, the Ethiopian Church then followed the Monophysite creed and later incorporated some indigenous elements in it in an attempt to “indigenise” the religion.

After that time, Orthodox Christianity was the established state religion of Ethiopia. It continued with this status up to the close of the twentieth century. Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930-1974) was the last of the so-called Solomonic Dynasty rulers who legally intertwined Christianity and the Ethiopian state in an “unholy marriage”.¹⁰ He did his level best to blend Christianity, the Ethiopian nation and the Solomonic throne as if they were one and inseparable.

4 Central Statistics Agency (CSA). 2007. “Summary and Statistical Reports of 2007 Population and Housing Census: Population Size by Age and Sex.” FDRE Population Census Commission, December 2008, Addis Ababa.

5 The decrease in the number of Orthodox Christians is mainly attributable to the “re-conversion” of Orthodox Christians into Protestantism. The number of increase in Protestants, who were about 11% in the 1994 census but reached to 18.6% in 2007, is roughly equal to the number of decrease in Orthodox Christians.

6 Markakis J. 1974. *Ethiopia: Anatomy of Traditional Polity*. London: Oxford University Press, 27.

7 Trimmingham JS. 1952. *Islam in Ethiopia*. London: Oxford University Press, 38.

8 Erlich H. 2010. *Islam and Christianity: Can They Coexist? The Answer Lies in the Horn of Africa*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 12.

9 Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of Traditional Polity*, 44. Ge’ez was the official language of Ethiopia until the middle of the 19th century and now used as the language of liturgy in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC).

10 Constitution of the Empire of Ethiopia, 1931 (Preamble), Revised Constitution of the Empire of Ethiopia, 1955 (article 26) Article 126 of the 1955 Revised Constitution, the 1960 Civil Code of the Empire of Ethiopia Proclamation No. 165 of 1960. The term “unholy marriage” is used to indicate the incompatibility

This trinity of church, state, and monarchy was so intrinsic that none could be separated without destroying the others. Moreover, Ethiopia's nationhood was consciously defined in terms of religion. Those who professed Christianity were considered to be Ethiopians and all others to be non-Ethiopians. This is illustrated in Markakis's observation when he states that, "according to tradition, Ethiopian nationality is theologically defined, its primary criterion being faith. A non-Christian could not be an Ethiopian, nor could an Ethiopian adhere to any other creed."¹¹ This was nothing but an advancement of the myth of a "Christian island Ethiopia" agenda. Semitic culture (including the Amharic language and Christianity) were the sole criteria for acquiring Ethiopian nationality. A person had to speak Amharic and profess Christianity to be an Ethiopian. Religion, by its nature, is exclusive where it excludes non-believers and followers of other religions from its domain. The rulers deliberately coined terms like "Christian Ethiopia", "an island of Christianity"¹² etc., making Ethiopian nationhood synonymous with Christianity in order to exclude the vast majority of the Ethiopian population who were non-Christians.

The overthrow of the Emperor in 1974 and the coming into power of the military regime (popularly called Derg¹³) heralded the final divorce of the state from religion and destroyed the unholy trinity of church, state, and throne. The Derg regime declared the secular socialist state of Ethiopia in which cultural, linguistic and religious equality could flourish. In practical terms, however, its religious policies were only superficial and later on focused on its atheist policies that antagonised religious communities in the country. The military junta itself was overthrown in 1991 by an ethno-nationalist force, which later came to be known as Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the new government further strengthened the separation of state and religion in the supreme law of the country that contributed to the constitutional equality of all religions.

Islam

Islam is the second largest religion in Ethiopia after Christianity. It consists of 34% of the country's total religious composition.¹⁴ Islam came to Ethiopia at the beginning of the seventh century CE, which makes Ethiopia the first country in

of goals for religious and political institutions as the first is working more for the life in the hereafter while the latter for this world.

11 Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of Traditional Polity*, 46.

12 "The Christian Island" rhetoric is believed to be coined by the religiously "moderate" Emperor Menelik II at the end of the 19th century due to the inclusion of large numbers of Muslims and traditional believers by the war of conquest. It was advanced by Haile Selassie I with his systematic official and unofficial policies of exclusion.

13 Derg is an Amharic term to denote Committee. Derg ruled the country from 1974 to 1991 with socialism as official state ideology.

14 Central Statistics Agency (CSA), 2007.

the world to accept Islam after Saudi Arabia, where the religion originated. Some scholars, such as constitutional lawyer and renowned scholar of federalism Assefa Fiseha,¹⁵ consider Ethiopia as “the first country to recognize Islam at state level in the world” substantiating his argument with mention of the Ethiopian king Nejashi, who in 615 CE welcomed the first Muslim immigrants from Arabia to his palace to practice their religion freely.

When the Prophet Mohammed and his companions faced persecution from their own Qurayish Arab tribes in Arabia, the Prophet advised them to go to Ethiopia in 615 CE.¹⁶ The Prophet told his disciples to obtain asylum from an Ethiopian king until things become stable in Arabia. Around twelve disciples (numbers are controversial, some say seventeen, others two hundred) of the Prophet arrived in Ethiopia in 615 CE, which is regarded in history as the date of the first *hijrah* (emigration) in Muslim history – in this case taking some of the first followers of Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to the Axumite Kingdom.¹⁷

The special status of Islam in Ethiopia is attested to by numerous writings, video and audio recordings. In a video recording by the Al-Habesha Islamic Club¹⁸ in cooperation with the Addis Ababa Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, Ethiopia has a special place in Islam mainly for the following reasons: (1) Ethiopia is the first country after Saudi Arabia to accept Islam following the first *hijrah*; (2) Among all the Meccan *sahabas* (followers),¹⁹ Bilal bin Rabah was the first black person to accept Islam and the first *muezzin* (prayer caller) who was of Ethiopian descent; (3) The first Muslim king was the Ethiopian king As’hama (Muslims used to call him Nejashi);²⁰ (4) The Prophet’s nurse was an Ethiopian woman named Baraka Umm Ayma;²¹ and (5) Ethiopia was freed from any use of force by Muslims in the words of the Prophet, “leave Abyssinians alone as long as they do not take the offensive”.

15 Assefa F. 2007. *Federalism and the Accommodation of Diversity in Ethiopia*. Revised Edition. Nijmegen: Wolf Legal, 22.

16 Al-Habesha Islamic Club, “The historic relationship between Islam and Ethiopia”, prepared by al-Habesha Islamic Club in cooperation with Addis Ababa Islamic Affairs Supreme Council. Online at: www.youtube.com, “Islam and Ethiopia (Amharic)”.

17 Ahmedin J. 2011. *Etyopiyawiyan Muslimoch ke 615-1700: Yechiqonana yetigil Tarik* [Ethiopian Muslims from 615 to 1700: A History of Oppression and Struggle]. Fourth Edition. Addis Ababa: Merewa, 34.

18 Al-Habesha Islamic Club, “The historic relationship between Islam and Ethiopia”.

19 The *sahabas* are those followers of the Prophet Mohammed while he was alive.

20 There are some controversies about the king’s conversion to Islam. See, for example, Dereje F. 2011, 4, who states, “The EOC recognizes the coming of the companions of the Prophet Mohammed (the *sahaba*) to Ethiopia in 615 AD. What it rejects, and does vehemently, is the Muslims’ claiming that the Christian king Armha (As’hama) who hosted the *sahaba* was converted to Islam.” This rejection of the EOC is also corroborated by writers like Sergew Hable Selassie, Tadesse Tamirat, Trimmingham and others.

21 Erlich H. 1994. *Ethiopia and the Middle East*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 5.

In light of the peaceful relations between the Muslim refugees and the Christian king of Ethiopia, the Prophet instructed his followers not to use any force against Ethiopia in the expansion of Islam. Hence, Islam was disseminated in the country through the peaceful means of missionary activities and long-distance trade.²² However, this does not mean that Muslim-Christian relations were always peaceful throughout history. There were series of conflicts and in some instances deadly clashes between them which will be discussed below.

ETHIOPIA'S RELIGIOUS PAST: CONFLICTING NARRATIVES

Contemporary Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia have become gradually defined by an (assumed) historical tradition of religious tolerance, rather than by the conflict model. This is, to a large degree, contested by Muslims, who maintain that coexistence was made possible only by Christian dominance and the subsequent marginalization of Muslims.²³

The above quotation indicates the existence of, at least, two perspectives on Ethiopia's religious past: one is largely drawn from Muslims and the other from non-Muslims, mainly the Orthodox Christians. From the Muslims perspectives, considering Ethiopia as a model of religious tolerance were tantamount to accepting the normality of structural and institutional oppression imposed on Ethiopian Muslims and acknowledging oppression as a normal way of life. For them, there had not been religious tolerance or equality in the true sense of the term where the Muslim and Christian communities accepted religious differences as a normal social phenomenon and respected one another's faiths. However, the narratives advanced by Christian writers deliberately excluded the views of the Muslims and totally controlled the definition of "what is meant by religious tolerance in the Ethiopian context". Due to their political, economic and social dominance, Christian writers excluded the views of the Muslims who offered counter-evidence in re-writing their own history. Some Muslim as well non-Muslim writers, who tried to refute the country's Christian-oriented history and reconstruct it in a more balanced way were given nicknames as *yetarik lapis* (an Amharic term to mean "eraser of history").

Muslim activists and writers argue that, the history of Islam and Muslims was either not included in the general Ethiopian history, or, if included, mostly distorted and misrepresented. A Muslim activist and historian Ahmedin Jebel, for example, argues that Ethiopian Islamic history is excluded from Ethiopian history through three major strategies – selection, omission and demonisation.²⁴ Christian Ethiopian historiographers have deliberately selected certain periods,

22 Abbink J. 1998. "An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics", *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11(2):112.

23 Desplat P and Østebø T. 2013. *Muslims in Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics and Islamic Reformism*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 3.

24 Ahmedin, *Etyopiyawiyan Muslimoch ke 615-1700*, 11-12.

historical events, places and cultural phenomena which amplify the interests of the dominant group while omitting or sometimes demonising certain events and activities that have the potential to undermine Christian interests and promote the deeds of their opponents.

Muslim writers and activists challenge the religious tolerance model and forward their own alternatives as “forbearance of Muslims to the status quo better captures the religious past of Ethiopia”.²⁵ However, some contemporary foreign and domestic scholars consider it as equivalent to “re-writing the religious history of the country”.²⁶ Others, on the other hand, praise the Muslims’ assertiveness as an effort to construct “a more balanced account of Ethiopia’s religious past.”²⁷

In spite of the long years of marginalisation and discrimination against Ethiopian Muslims, institutionalised by subsequent imperial rules, the long-held view of Ethiopia’s religious past inclined towards the religious tolerance model that has defined the religious history of the country though contested by Muslims. It is, of course, inappropriate to put all Muslims in one box and argue that all reject the tolerance model in favor of the forbearance model. For the non-Muslims, on the other hand, Ethiopia’s religious past has generally been understood to mean “tolerance and peaceful coexistence”, but it would also equally wrong to include all non-Muslims in the religious tolerance model.

Defining tolerance

Tolerance can be difficult to define. The Oxford English Dictionary, eleventh edition, defines tolerance as “the ability, willingness, or capacity to tolerate something”.²⁸ It then defines the word “tolerate” as “to allow the existence or occurrence of (something that one dislikes or disagrees with) without interference; [or allow] to endure (someone or something unpleasant) with forbearance.” From this definition, tolerance is understood to mean that people accept or are prepared to accept something which is different from their thinking or worldview. It is also stated in the definition that forbearance is included within the domain of tolerance. Nonetheless, tolerance is more positive than

25 Ahmedin, *Etyopiyawiyan Muslimoch ke 615-1700*, 11-12.

26 See, for example, Abbink Jon. 2011. “Religion in Public Spaces: Emerging Muslim-Christian Polemics in Ethiopia”, *African Affairs* 110/439:253-274.

27 Dereje F. 2011. “Accommodation, tolerance or forbearance? The politics of representing Ethiopia’s religious past”. Paper presented at The 4th European Conference on African Studies, Uppsala, Sweden, 1-2. Dereje wrote that “there are few countries [in the world] as burdened by their past as Ethiopia. It is no wonder thus history has been one of the major sites of political contestation.” He added that “Ethiopian historiography, like history writing elsewhere, is a contested terrain. [Moreover], historiography is acutely contested particularly in countries where history is one of the cores of political legitimacy.”

28 2008. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. Eleventh Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

forbearance in that the former entails restraint on both groups to respect the views of one another while the latter implies accepting oppression from one side. In forbearance, one group is forced to accept the views of the other without necessarily requiring reciprocity. The Amharic terms *mechal* (forbearance) and *mechachal* (tolerance) are used throughout this chapter to explain the Muslim forbearance and the Christian tolerance narrations respectively. In *mechal* (forbearance), one group is subjected to accept the superior position of another and duty-bound to respect the values of the other group. However, in *mechachal* (tolerance) both are equally required to respect one another.

Joan Wallach Scott, a historian who has written on conflicts over the Muslim veil in France, does not like to use words such as “tolerance” or “toleration” to express the recognition of diversity or differences since the word has negative connotations for those who are tolerated in implying their inferior position. Instead, Scott convincingly proposes that acknowledgement of differences by the state or those in power, particularly of minority groups, is a better term for capturing a sense of equality. Acknowledging differences instead of tolerating them, serves to “call into question the certainty and superiority of the established views”.²⁹ Scott recommends negotiation of differences non-hierarchically on common grounds of shared differences, since these are an unavoidable phenomenon in pluralistic social life. Others also categorise tolerance into pseudo and genuine. The former being rooted in skepticism towards others while the latter is based on “respect for truth and the dignity of others”.³⁰

Religious tolerance and forbearance narratives in Ethiopia

The religious tolerance of the past in Ethiopia is subject to different and perhaps contradictory interpretations by different groups. For some, it was *mechachal* (tolerance), for others it was accommodation and still for others it was *mechal* (forbearance).³¹ The Amharic term *mechachal* (tolerance) signifies mutual restraints from both groups (in our case Muslims and Orthodox Christians) from upsetting the other group and respect the views and religious values of others. *Mechal* (forbearance), on the other hand, imposes a duty on the one group to respect the other without reciprocity.

Some writings indicate that, Ethiopia is considered to be a model of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims. It is said that, what makes Ethiopia unique among the countries of the world is not only its early reception of the two major Abrahamic religions (Christianity and Islam), but also the unprecedented peaceful coexistence of these religions

29 Scott JW. 2007. *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 19.

30 Tyler A. 2008. *Islam, the West, and Tolerance: Conceiving Coexistence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 73.

31 Dereje, “Accommodation, tolerance or forbearance?”, 14-19, 3-9.