

*An historical-anthropological approach to Islam in Ethiopia: issues of identity and politics**

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ABSTRACT *Islam and Islamic populations in Ethiopia have been relatively understudied since the great survey of J.S. Trimingham published in 1952. Ethiopian Islam is interesting both because of its antiquity (since the inception of Islam itself) and because of the particular patterns of interaction and symbiosis with an, until recently, predominantly Christian culture. A socio-cultural and historical explanation of patterns of tolerance of Islam and Christianity since the 16th century deserves to be developed. In addition, the relationships between religious and ethnic identification among Ethiopia's diverse populations are not well known and need further scrutiny.*

In the last decade, new issues of religious identity and communal political identity of Muslims in Ethiopia emerge in the wake of the political and socio-economic reforms in federal Ethiopia and the impact of 'globalization' processes in the cultural sense. While Ethiopians Muslims have in recent years gone through a phase of revivalism and self-assertion, they have remained rather impervious to 'fundamentalist' ideological movements in both a social and political sense.

This article gives a brief historical overview of Islam in Ethiopia, its position in the pre-1974 empire and its relationship with Christianity, and the changes under the Communist Mengistu regime up to 1991. Finally some of the major changes since 1991 are discussed, presenting challenges for debate and further socio-historical research on the place and role of Muslims in Ethiopia and on the relationship of Islam (and Christianity) with 'modernity', ethnicity and group identity in Ethiopia.

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1. Introduction

African Islam has many forms, and since the introduction of the faith on the continent it has been marked by a history of multiple interactions with pre-existing belief-systems and with Christianity – both imported missionary Christianity and indigenous forms (Egypt, North Africa, Nubia, and Ethiopia).

In the African context, the role and place of Islam in Ethiopia have remained relatively understudied. However, a deeper understanding of Islam in this country is of great relevance, not only because of the notable political changes in the country since 1991, but also in the context of late twentieth-century conditions of political, economic and cultural globalization which is shaping both domestic policies and ethnic identification as well as international relations.

A consideration of Islam in Ethiopia evokes several interesting questions: (a) what is the historical trajectory of Islam in Ethiopia as part of the general movement of Islam as a world religion in Africa?; (b) what are the patterns of coexistence and articulation of Islam – as a faith and a way of life – with ethnicity, Christianity and traditional religions in Ethiopia?; and (c) will Ethiopian Islam ideologically connect with global ideological movements of revivalism and ‘fundamentalism’, which have been emerging as a counter-discourse against Western-driven economic and cultural ‘modernity’?

In this respect, we start by noting three characteristics of Ethiopian Islam that cry out for more research:

- (a) the pattern of the spread and adoption of Islam in Ethiopia as part of a sub-global movement into Africa connected to an intercontinental tradition of learning and civilization;
- (b) the reasons for alternating phases of violence and incorporation in the interaction of Muslims with the wider Ethiopian society; and
- (c) the social organization and ‘indigenization’ of Islam by ethnic, regional and social groups in Ethiopia (on this point it should be seen as part of the wider north-east African region).

These questions will not all be answered here but they define the outlines of a more in-depth study of Ethiopian Islamic populations.

The ‘quest for identity’ is an expression that can be applied to the efforts of Ethiopian Muslims to be recognized, to organize, and to raise their position in the country towards parity with the Christians, who have been politically and culturally dominant from the fourth century until the 1970s. This quest has been fraught with difficulties of an historical and political nature, some of which will be mentioned in what follows.

In the past decade, especially since the arrival of a new regime in Ethiopia in 1991 emphasizing the ethnic identity and public religious equality of Islam and Christianity, the issue of connecting to global developments in Islam as an expanding world-religion and identity has emerged as a major concern for Ethiopian Muslims, who had until then been marked by a strong inward orientation.

An important question at present is whether Islam in Ethiopia will serve as a vehicle for political or social mobilization and exclusivist identity, as has