Meron Zeleke Eresso

Faith at the Crossroads: Religious Syncretism and Dispute Settlement in Northern Ethiopia. A Study of Sufi Shrine in North Eastern Ethiopia, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2015, XII+201 p., 23 ill., 3 maps, 8 tables, ISBN 978-447-10353-4, 68€, hardback.

Patrick Desplat & Terje Østebø, (eds.)

Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism, London, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013, XII+267 p., 14 fig., ISBN 978-1-137-32529-7, \$100, hardback.

These two publications testify to new trends in the field of Islam in Ethiopian studies dealing with around one third of Ethiopia's population. A brief review cannot do justice to the importance of these two fine books, but both herald advances in the study of Muslims in Ethiopia. Meron Z. Eresso's monograph is an in-depth case study of a Sufi shrine and its local community role on arbitrating conflicts. In contrast, Desplat and Østebø's edited volume touches upon several wider social, historical and political issues regarding Muslim life in Ethiopia. Both books read together provide a very good update on the issues at hand and add to a rapidly expanding field where mostly Ethiopian researchers have recently made great contributions, notably in history, anthropology, philology and manuscript studies, the latter demonstrating the deep roots of the Islamic tradition in the country.

Recent upheavals and conflicts in the Ethiopia also included Muslims and some of their elites, notably in Addis Ababa, i.e. before the 2015–16 Oromo and Amhara protests on land issues and recognition. In 2012–14, a younger generation of Muslim spokesmen referring to global Islamic trends and so-called 'reformism' made growing claims in the public sphere and communal self-organization, leading to a government clamp-down with leadership arrests and suppression of demonstrations. Although it is of course difficult to speak of a 'unified' Muslim community, as both the doctrines and the practices of the faith are divergent and intersect with regional and ethno-regional identities, the chapters in *Muslim Ethiopia* provide an essential background for understanding the varieties of Muslim identities in the country.

Desplat-Østebø's collective volume, however, based on solid field studies, hints also at the emergence of a more politicized Muslim discourse not always free from harsh polemical rivalries and perhaps 'extremism' within the community as well as conflict with others, especially with the long-time dominant but in-between declining Orthodox 'Tewahido' Christians and the growing Evangelical varieties. Especially on internet platforms, there have been vehement

debates and mutual discourses of challenge if not enmity between these faiths, and it is a pity that no chapter in the book is devoted to this topic. The impact of press polemics and cyberspace discourse – although in part censored by the Ethiopian state – has been serious and did much to create divisions and antipathies, although these are not universally shared by the common believers of both faiths, who mostly appreciate mutual accommodation and ‘getting along’ in everyday life.

Meron Eresso’s monograph on T’eru Sina, a Sufi shrine in northern Ethiopia, is an example of such “getting-along attitude”, and discusses the works of the local shaykh’s ‘court’ as a dispute-regulating mechanism that appeals to local people, regardless of their religious affiliation (except that Protestant-Evangelicals would not go there). The more ‘Sufi-oriented’ forms of Islam thus often foster practical toleration and interaction, although clearly Sufism cannot be universally seen as ‘tolerant’ or non-political. In rural environments, we can register forms of accommodation and mediation between local faith adherents from Orthodox Christians as well, but in urban settings, we find more tensions as reactive movements are asserting themselves: (a) *vis-à-vis* ‘reformist’ Muslims, notably several more extremist spokesmen of *Muwahhidun* (‘Wahhabi’)-oriented groups and Salafists; and (b) towards emerging Protestant-Evangelist churches that have notably increased in number and size since 1991. In this year, the new Ethiopian regime under the EPRDF heralded an era of formal religious freedoms and reaffirmed a secular state model.

Renewed contacts of Christian and Muslim communities with foreign religious institutions, schools and money providing organizations followed. However, soon such foreign influences have been perceived as ‘meddling’ in the Ethiopian model of relative religious tolerance – not without some justification. As referred to in Østebø’s *Postscript* (pp. 241–258), the Muslim community has been under siege by the government in the years 2011–2014 and the leaders of certain ‘reformist’, Saudi-funded Muslim schools and NGOs in Addis Ababa were closely monitored and later arrested. A few dozen were brought to trial on ‘terrorism’-related charges and put in prison with heavy sentences (most were released in 2016 to appease the new wave of land-issue protests that emerged). Nevertheless, the Protestant-Evangelical and Orthodox Churches were also under constant scrutiny. Ethiopia as a secular state tries to keep neutrality towards organized religion, and the authorities understand it as one of their duties to survey religious-political claim-making and public polemics and act as custodian of religious peace. However, their neutrality and management of religious diversity and its dynamics have been weak, not having a capacity for guaranteeing long-term stability. As Østebø notes, ‘governmental Islam’

(p. 246) has not been a success, although the regime's suppression of Muslim politics and 'extremism' was.

The collective volume *Muslim Ethiopia* – a somewhat provocative title as Ethiopia is neither 'Christian' anymore nor 'Muslim' – has ten chapters, preceded by an informative introduction authored by the editors. Here they discuss themes like the long-standing image of so-called religious tolerance in Ethiopia as well as the idea that Muslim 'radicalism' is of recent date and mostly imported from abroad. They call both ideas 'inaccurate perceptions.' They draw a helpful historical context of religious relations in Ethiopia to further discuss these points. Although some details might be more accurate; for instance, the incident with which they begin – an attack by Muslim on Christian churches in March 2011 – was not "...a consequence of the desecration of the *Qur'an* by an Ethiopian Christian" (p. 1) but a *rumor* that made it happen. The difference is essential, showing that the growth of distrust, not facts, is at issue. However, the introduction does a good job in reframing the assessment of the role of Muslims in Ethiopia. The chapter by R. Marchal and Zakaria Sheikh is focusing more on Somalia discussing with fascinating insides on the *Ahlu as-Sunna wal-Jamā'a* – movement that during the civil conflict in southern Somalia was allied with Ethiopia (against the violent-Islamist *Harakat al Shabaab al Mujahiddin* movement). H. Erlich's chapter has more general concerns, summarizing the regional geo-political context of the Horn as such. The other chapters in this collection cover a wide array of topics: the 'struggle' for public recognition by Muslims (Dereje), the processes of religious change among Afar pastoralists (Rettberg), the saint (*wālīy*) venerating practices and Muslim 'reformism' among the Silte people (Zerihun), trajectories of Muslim youth identification and mobilization in Bale (Østebø), identity debates on Islamic tradition and 'reform' in the Muslim city of Harar (Desplat), 'gendering discourse' and (Muslim) Orthodoxy (Eresso), and finally, Muslim transborder activism of the short-lived offspring of Muslim Brotherhood, the *Tadamun* organization in the Somali region of Ethiopia, associated with or modified by clan ties across the national frontiers (Hansen).

A brief review cannot delve deeply into the various interpretations given on the evolution of Muslim life and communities in Ethiopia, but it might be sufficient to sum up that this collection is highly stimulating and inspiring for further research. It becomes increasingly difficult to maintain, as was done by generations of scholars, that "the study of Islam in Ethiopia has been neglected." That is no longer the case (The late prof. Hussein Ahmed, to whom the Desplat-Østebø book is dedicated, was a pioneer here). Certainly, both religions in Ethiopia – Christianity and Islam – are closely intertwined in their

history and impact on the dynamics of Ethiopian society. But this book, despite its subtitle, doesn't say much about the Christian heritage, and one recurring issue is that of hints of the 'collectivist fallacy' in considering 'Islam' as a phenomenon, a faith bloc, that moves through time and history regardless of its impact on social structure, region, ethnicity and other societal factors. But probably there is no collective 'cause' of Islam in Ethiopia, no collective inferiority or second-class status of all Muslims in the country, but notable diversity and agency across societal sectors and organizational principles. As the editors rightly note, Islam is not a collective 'security risk', like the Ethiopian government has more than once suggested. But neither are all forms of Islam peace-loving and tolerant, which is why state policy deemed it imperative to contain its political claim-making or radical expansion. The argument of a structural 'othering' of Islam in Ethiopia made by some authors, among them Østebø and Desplat in previous works, is, I think, somewhat tenuous and could only be applied to the political conception of Christianity that was in vigor under former emperor Haile Selassie.

Eresso's book (based on her 2012 PhD thesis) on religious syncretism and dispute settlement in the context of the mountain-top Sufi shrine T'eru Sina in north-central Ethiopia is an important case study of Muslim religious culture in Ethiopia, and contributes further to wider debates on religion and Islam in Africa. The author emphasizes the element of ethnic and religious 'border crossing' (p. 1) and theoretically frames the case study within debates on 'syncretism'. In eight chapters, she discusses the history of the shrine that was founded and developed by the Sufi mystic *shaykh* Sirajj Muhammad (1885–1972) in the 1930s. Further she describes the religious practices at the shrine, the perceptions and enactments of boundaries, the 'sacred' legal order as embodied in the 'Shaykhs' court', and finally, processes of dispute settlement and the associated sanctions. This latter chapter is a particularly interesting one as it outlines in detail the phases of the 'judicial' process at the shrine. The entire account of *shaykh* – and later 'saint' – Sirajj and of the shrine as a center of piety, ritual intercession and mediation on behalf of the faithful locals, is a skillful ethnography, rich and well-told, and theoretically appealing. The case study shows a well-working customary law system, built on the sincerity and local 'professionalism' of the Muslim mediators and community leaders. They appeal to local people because of a shared, underlying culture of religious respect, piety and interpersonal values, present among Christians, Muslims and traditional-religious persons, and produce satisfactory 'justice', despite that the courtly procedure invokes various peculiar 'legal' elements, like the *c'eri*, the feared divinatory sanction, instead of the hearing of witnesses to ascertain

guilt or innocence (pp. 154–55). In this work, Eresso has also placed the dispute regulation process and the practices and appeal of this shrine very well within the local historical and cultural context.

These two publications make a fascinating reading. They demonstrate to what extent Ethiopia has a remarkable and at the same time complex society, despite its perennial political and economic troubles. Therefore, both books are highly recommended.

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