

## Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Public Space - An Arena for Religious Rivalry - Dr. Kindeneh Endeg

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The prominence of religion in the public space is one of the dominant features of life in today's Addis Ababa. This essay discusses interreligious rivalry and competition, involving Orthodox Christians, Protestants and Muslims. The paper seeks to show that the religious rivalry and competition is much more pervasive and widespread, involving mainstream religious institutions and the majority of their followers, than something confined to reformist movements on the fringe as often assumed.

### Introduction

For more than a decade now, the public space in Addis Ababa has become an arena of interreligious rivalry and competition among the major confessional groups in town. Most taxicabs and other public service vehicles display posters and stickers with overt polemical messages. The ever expanding sectarian spectacle accompanying regular religious processions in the annual calendars of these confessional groups is another manifestation of the phenomenon. The popular Epiphany procession is perhaps the best example on the Orthodox Christian side. Small banners and ribbons, mostly in green, yellow and red, the colours of the Ethiopian national flag, hang from Orthodox Christian

churches and blanket the city. The sight has become part of holiday festivities. The procession also sees giant crosses and huge, billboard style posters of saints and angels, adorn thoroughfares and public squares.

Not to be outdone, during the two principal Islamic annual holidays, *Eid al-Adha* and *Eid al-Fitr*, as well as the weekly *Jumu'ah* (Friday) prayers, Muslims also turn out in large numbers to claim as much of the public space as they can. Having little by way of religious artefacts and elaborate processions, they do so mostly via display of sheer numerical size. And, at first sight, Protestants who are seen as late-comers to the country (which denies them an officially recognized separate liturgical calendar for public processions) may seem to be at a disadvantage. A closer inspection, however, proves the case to be otherwise. To give but one example, Protestants engage in what they call "gospel crusades". This involves frequent patrolling of town, calling upon residents to join their campaigns, using powerful loudspeakers, mounted on a van or minibus that can be heard from miles away.

Fierce competition for the public space and the predominantly urban nature of the religious dynamics described above are among the themes least explored in the growing body of secondary literature on contemporary religious issues in Ethiopia. There has been a disproportionate focus on the activities of reformist movements, especially the 'political' Islam of the *Wahhabiya* and *Salafiya* variety and Evangelical Pentecostalism, which conveys the impression that most of the religious dynamism is the work of these groups.<sup>[1]</sup>

On the other hand, there are quite a few scholars who call for locally situated analyses and understanding of the phenomenon that takes into account the post 1991 secular pluralistic order. Followers of what came down historically as minority religions, especially Islam and Protestantism, started to enjoy the benefits of freedom of worship and religious plurality that grant them equal rights with followers of Orthodox Christianity, the state religion until 1974<sup>[2]</sup>. Building on the works of scholars who situate the phenomenon within the context of the post 1991 secular-pluralistic order, this article seeks to contribute to the discussion on the causes behind the ongoing interreligious tension and rivalry in Addis Ababa by highlighting the role of mainstream liturgical activities of the Orthodox Church and Islam.

The central argument here is that the rivalry and competition is much more widespread and pervasive than something confined to the activity of reformist movements on the fringe. The paper draws on personal observations of the author over the past four years as well as interviews with city residents in the spring of 2013.

**Epiphany: subversive discourse against the secular order?**

The 2009 Epiphany procession in Addis Ababa featured many of the city's Orthodox youth wearing a T-shirt with the slogan "Ethiopia, a Christian Island". Shortly after, the incident was condemned by the head of government at the time, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, as "anathema" to constitutionally sanctioned "religious equality".[3] Viewed in this light, it is interesting that other recent additions to Epiphany with similar, if not more exclusivist sectarian implications, have eluded the same level of official scrutiny.

Epiphany – *Timqet* in Amharic – is one of two annual holidays on the calendar of the Orthodox Church that involves public processions. As much as it purports to be just religious, the holiday is however every bit social and political as well. Hence the slogan, "Ethiopia, a Christian Island" resurfacing specifically in connection to Epiphany. This essay proposes the possibility that it might represent a symbolic attempt to restore the right of the Orthodox Church to exclusive entitlement of public space, deriving from the status of the Orthodox Christianity as the official religion of the historic Ethiopian state prior to the 1974 socialist revolution. The performances and visual imageries of Epiphany with such symbolism and signification include blanketing the city with the national flag (hence appropriation and redeployment of a national symbol for sectarian activity and, thereby, also betraying a wish for a remarriage of church and state, pre-1974 style), saturating the public space with huge signs of the cross and large posters of saints and angels. No wonder then that most incidents of violent confrontations between Muslims and Orthodox Christians across the country, especially over the last decade or so, have occurred during Epiphany celebrations.[4]

### **Show of numerical strength a source of entitlement?**

"Why this obsession with blocking the roads?" one often hears many Christian residents of Addis Ababa complain every Friday. This is in reference to the familiar scene of Muslims flowing out of mosques into the surrounding areas during *Jumu'ah*, the weekly midday Friday prayers. Muslims defend this as a matter of necessity, a matter of simple maths, emphatically asserting that the number of worshipers participating in the weekly prayers far exceeds the holding capacity of mosques.

Many Christians would have none of this. To the more furious, the practice is simply an abuse of the freedom of worship on the part of Muslims, done for the sheer pleasure of making life difficult for other city dwellers. In support of their argument, Christians often cite the case of the hundred plus mosques built over the last two decades in the capital. These mosques, Christians contend, are more than enough to accommodate every Muslim in the city. Others, while not so skeptical and less ready to impugn motive, nonetheless betray similar frustration, complaining that regardless of the reasons, the practice is taking a toll on their daily lives. .

Many mosques have been built over the last two decades in Addis Ababa, as well as the country at large. However, Muslims view their gains regarding the right to build worship houses to be precarious, pointing to the alleged aggressive backlash from Christians. They also complain that when it comes to fulfilling the promise of the constitutional freedom of worship and religious plurality, Muslims are given the short end of the stick and the state has still a long way to go in terms of ensuring and safeguarding the rights of all religious groups. Some Muslims argue that redressing centuries of inequality and discrimination requires more than just the ratification of a secular constitution. Muslims contend that the declaration of religious freedom meant that now they can fulfil the requirements of their religion by doing things that were forbidden by law in the past, such as the very public act of participating in the weekly Friday prayer and the two annual *Eids*.<sup>[5]</sup>

Viewed in this light, this study argues that the numbers game in general and the evident zeal of Muslims to ensure maximum turnout for the *Jumu'ah* and two annual holidays needs to be seen within the context of the politics of the ongoing struggle of Ethiopian Muslims to overcome their historical plight, which involves defending the recent gains while striving for more.

Muslims also dispute the assertion that their number is less than the Orthodox Christians both in Addis Ababa and the rest of the country. They claim that their minority status is a product of historical injustice rather than numerical size. They contend that it is because they were confined to the private sphere that they appear fewer than their actual number. By huge turnout, it therefore seems that Muslims are arguing their version of history, that what makes them appear smaller than their actual size is historical injustice. Flooding the public space in large numbers also seems, partly, to be an effort to expand their gains. If the number of Muslims is at parity or exceeds the number of Orthodox Christians, it follows that they have a right to physical space, proportional if not more than their Orthodox Christian counterparts.

Such performative signification of the practice of huge turnout is further evident in the fact that applications to the city municipality for a plot of land for the construction of mosques in Addis Ababa over the last decade or so have met with fierce resistance from mostly the Orthodox Christian residents of the respective localities, who lodge counter-applications opposing the move, with the assertion that the number of mosques in the city has already outstripped the need of worshipers.<sup>[6]</sup>

### **Stickers, posters and gospel songs: the sacral pop culture**

As indicated at the opening section of this essay, the space that was formerly reserved for European Football stars and Hollywood celebrities in the thousands of small taxis and minibuses in Addis Ababa is being taken over by polemical religious stickers and

posters. On the Orthodox side the favourite themes of this quite innovative sectarian media features images of the various saints and angels usually accompanied by captions that emphasize the intercessory power of the saintly figures to grant the faithful access to God.

Muslims and Protestants also make good use of this medium of popular culture. The most popular taxi posters and stickers on the Protestant side, include; "Just Jesus will do", " I belong to Jesus", "Jesus saves", "Jesus is Lord" etc. The unmistakable polemical exchange with the Orthodox Christian counterpart is implied in the exclusive emphasis on Jesus Christ deriving from the Protestant denial of the intercessory role of saints. On the Muslim side, the most popular sticker is "For me just Allah will do", a self-evident textual polemical sparring with the Orthodox. Other Quranic verses and even the *shahadah*, i.e., the Islamic profession of faith, are also common.

### **Conclusions**

This essay foregrounds competition in the public sphere between the three faiths. This recent phenomena relies on standard liturgical practices and 'new' media. It underlines the importance of the role of mainstream religious practices as tools of gaining prominence and public space. These practices have become symbols in religious competition and ultimately signify the evolutionary adaptability of religious competition in the urban sphere. The potential for public manifestations of religious competition to lead to tensions and hostility suggests the need for government regulation and policies to ensure that this does not occur.

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[1] Abbink, 2011; Efrem, 2008 & Mustafa and Haggai, 2006

[2] Hussien 2006; Dereje, 2011& Østebo, 2008

[3] Dereje 2011

[4] Hussein, 2006

[5] Hussein, 2006

[6] Hussein, 2006