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## The Question of Becoming: Islamic Reform-Movements in Contemporary Ethiopia

Terje Østebø

**WP 2007: 8**



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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Islam in Ethiopia has historically found itself in the shadow of the dominating Christian state. The intermarriage between the state and the church, with the monarchy and Christianity as the defining elements of Ethiopian nationhood, led to the perception of Islam as its anti-thesis; one the one hand because of the perceived danger Islam as an external force posed to the Christian Ethiopia, and on the other hand because the Ethiopian Muslims refused to let themselves become culturally/religiously integrated into this Ethiopianness. Whereas the state-church marriage came to an end with the revolution in 1974, the Muslims largely remained on the margins of society. Although the new Marxist regime (the Derg)<sup>2</sup> initially was welcomed by the Muslims, the regime's policy of curtailing any form of religious expressions was soon felt by each religious community, including the Muslim. In other words, Islam being subject to subjugation both from the Christian state and the Marxist project, has created a situation where Ethiopia's Muslims have remained a rather invisible entity within the country, marginalised and secluded from the rest of the Ethiopian society.

Seeking to redress the imparity of the past, The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPDRF), assuming power in 1991, introduced a policy intended to secure the rights of the country's many ethnic and religious groups, both recognising the diversity and seeking to enhance equality within the diversity.<sup>3</sup> As a new situation of increased religious freedom emerged, this inevitably paved the way for marked enthusiasm and to the boosting of religious activities from the side of the Muslim population. Clearly seen by the increase of new mosques all over the country, the emergence of Islamic organisations and Muslims becoming increasingly visible in public life – the new political climate led to the surfacing of a new consciousness and new religious affiliations (Østebø 1998, 443f). The revitalisation of religious virtues, the articulation of religious identities, the reproduction of religious symbols and the demarcation of religious boundaries have moreover paved the way for increased intra-religious plurality and inter-religious tensions, in turn sparking renewed focus on Islam both from the Ethiopian (Christian) public and from foreign observers. Unfortunately, the lack of in-depth studies on contemporary Islam in Ethiopia has clearly impinged on the debate on Islam in Ethiopia, where inherent biases and unfounded assumptions dominate.

Through a discussion of three major Islamic reform movements, this paper intends to provide much needed insights of the complexity of current developments within the Muslim community in Ethiopia. Paying attention to the recruitment of followers, the ideological content and the development of these movements in the last decade, this contribution argues that these movements were pivotal for the articulation of religious affiliation and the construction of identity in post-1991 Ethiopia. Moreover, the paper seeks to demonstrate how these processes were determined by complex interactions between factors inherent in the local contexts and the trans-local currents reaching Ethiopia in this period. Situating the religious development within the wider political, ethnical, cultural and societal discourses in contemporary Ethiopia, a main point of this contribution

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the conference; *Religion on the Borders: New Challenges in the Academic Study of Religion*, Södertörn University-college, Stockholm, 19-22 April, 2007. I am grateful to Anne Sofie Roald (Malmö University and Chr. Michelsen Institute) for her constructive comments to an earlier draft. The usual disclaimer applies.

<sup>2</sup> Lit. meaning – “committee”, signifying the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces taking control in 1974. The term has moreover been applied for the Marxist regime in power from 1974 to 1991.

<sup>3</sup> One need to be reminded that while these rights were asserted in the 1994 constitution, there exists a great discrepancy between the stated policy and the regime's practice. For more details, see (Tronvoll 2000)

is to argue for the need to consider the locality in discerning wider currents within contemporary Islam.<sup>4</sup>

## Questions, answers and the quest for identity

In an attempt to conceptualise this development, I believe the *process of objectification* drawn from Eickelman and Piscatori serves as a relevant point of departure. Situated in the so-called modern era, where the crumbling of traditional authorities and structures impinge on shared understandings, the process of objectification is described as a process where basic questions are objectified and put to the forefront of the believers' minds, and where he or she is forced to explicitly formulate questions such as 'What are my religion? Why is it important to my life? and How does my belief guide my conduct?'. The outcome of this process is in turn said to be the surfacing of religion as 'a self-contained system', articulated and objectified by the adherents. The process is moreover perceived as opening up for a new religious discourse and involving a broader part of actors in the reconfiguration of religious symbols (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, 38f).<sup>5</sup> While Eickelman and Piscatori underscore the formulations of questions, said to have shaped 'the discourse and practices of Muslims', I believe that although the asking of questions obviously would be intrinsic to the process of objectification, we need to recognise the aspect of new and alternative religious ideas being introduced. In the process of objectification, leading to the articulation of religion as a 'self-contained system', distinguished from other systems, the formulations of questions would not be sufficient; there need also be answers. As this particular case demonstrates, the introduction of different new ideologies has informed the process of objectification in Ethiopia in the sense of creating a variety of articulated religious affiliations and moreover increased the diversity within the Muslim community.<sup>6</sup>

The availability of new alternatives has been augmented by the constant flow of ideas intrinsically linked to the global era; ideas crossing spatial and cultural boundaries at a range and at a pace unprecedented in history (Bauman 1998; Schreier 1997). A pivotal aspect of this movement of ideas is the jetlag occurring by their remoulding within respective localities. Whereas the recognition of the spatial dimension in discourses over globalisation in general, and with regard to Islam in particular is to be welcomed (Asad 1986; Eickelman 1982), there is an apparent risk of the global/local replacing the earlier traditional/modern dichotomy (Probst, et al. 2002). The concept of *glocalisation* has proven helpful in this regard (Robertsen 1992). Recognising the parallel interrelation of processes; localisation taking place universally, and universalising being played locally, this concept enables us to come to terms with the inherent complexity of the movement of ideas and the ways they are being remoulded within respective localities. Seen from the perspective of the locality, this contribution intends to demonstrate how this dialectic of trans-local/universal ideas mutually affect, and are informed by each other, determining the outcome and the content of the process of objectification.

Lastly, the process of objectification needs to be situated in a broader discourse of *identification*. Discharging the notion of identity as fixed entity, and construing identity as constantly constructed in an on-going process through the individual's interactions with his or her surroundings (Hall

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<sup>4</sup> The data for this paper was collected through an extensive fieldwork carried out in Bale from January 2005 to December 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The term objectification is also used by Berger & Luckman and Bourdieu, although in a different manner (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Bourdieu 2003).

<sup>6</sup> The articulation of questions, signifying the existence of crisis, and the availability of new ideas, indicating solution is analogous to what Westerlund's thesis of 'discontent' and 'content'. Whereas the former represent various aspects of grievance, the latter constitutes constructive factors forwarded by the advocates of Islamic movements and gaining attraction among disgruntled recipients (Westerlund 1997).

1996a; Hall 1996b), this process will here be treated in relation to the two following aspects. First, a rather intense and highly politicised debate on ethnicity in Ethiopia has clearly affected the developments within the religious sphere. Whereas there on the one hand is a tendency of separating ethnic and religious boundaries by distinguishing social relations within a primordialist narrative from religious motivated evaluations, the two have on the other hand mutually informed each other, contributing to the creation and reinforcement of both ethnic and intra-religious boundaries. Secondly, the process of identification needs to be related to the inter-religious situation of Ethiopia and the subordinate position of Muslims caused by the historical hegemony of the Christians. Informed by the notion of identity being constructed through the dialectic interaction between individuals and their surroundings; constant negotiations between the individual's internal self identification within the group to which he or she belongs and the external categorisation applied to this group by the other (Jenkins 1994; Jenkins 1996), my argument is that the Christian hegemony has had clear impact on the development of Islam in contemporary Ethiopia. Through a largely derogatory categorisation of the Muslims by the Christian other, the former has developed a distinct self-definition seeing themselves as inferior to the latter. Although this notion currently is being challenged, it has proven to be strong, having clear implications for the confidence and resources available for the Muslims to carve out public space and to redress the status quo.

## Post-1991 Ethiopia

The new policies introduced by EPDRF in 1991, ended the restrictions on *Hajj* and on import of religious literature, allowed the construction of mosques and enabled the creation of Islamic organisations, newspapers and magazines (Hussein Ahmed 1994, 791). Naturally, the candour that followed the downfall of the Derg had dramatic consequences for the Muslim community, providing them with public space unprecedented in the country's history. Among the Islamic organisations established in the early 1990s, we find the *Ethiopian Muslim Unity Association*, the *Ethiopian Muslim Democratic Movement*, the *Ethiopian Muslim Youth Association* and the *Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council* (Hussein Ahmed 1994, 792f). Most of them were relatively short-lived, and must be seen in relation to the enthusiasm that existed at that time. As expressed by one of my informants; 'every single person was establishing his own party in these days'. Secondly, Islamic newspapers and magazines surfaced, printing commentaries intended to refute different allegations and 'misinterpretations' of Islam, either in the form of answers to various articles published in local Amharic newspapers, or as independent comments on controversies between Christians and Muslims (Hussein Ahmed 1994, 793; Hussein Ahmed 1998, 98f). Thirdly, several large public demonstrations were to be seen in the streets of Addis Ababa. Whereas many of these demonstrations addressed internal affairs within the Muslim community, there were others more directly concerned with Islam in relation to society and politics. A large demonstration in November 1994 demanded among others, the inclusion of the *shari'a*-law as one of the basis for the new Ethiopian constitution, and challenged the ban of head-scarves for girls in high schools.<sup>7</sup>

Many of these activities were closely linked to, and even carried out by reform movements rapidly expanding in these years, movements that became important in shaping an increasingly diversified Muslim community.

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<sup>7</sup> There is a general ban on wearing of (Muslim) head-scarves throughout Ethiopia, apparently not codified in any written form. Demands for repealing of this ban have repeatedly been forwarded by the Muslim community in many parts of the country.

## Islamic reform movements

There are three main reform-movements to be discerned in today's Ethiopia. Although some of them surfaced some decades back, common for them all is that they have gained their momentum in the post-1991 period.

The one receiving most attention is the Salafi movement, ideologically and financially affiliated to Saudi Arabia.<sup>8</sup> This is also the movement with the longest history in Ethiopia, having its antecedents back to the late 1940s. Although much of its initial history remains in the dark, it seems clear that it first appeared in the south-eastern part of the country, then following different paths of expansion.<sup>9</sup> Erlich argues in a recent study that Salafism gained foothold in Ethiopia through an increasing number of Ethiopians returning from the *hajj* during the Italian occupation (1935-1942). In particular, he mentions a certain Sheikh Yusuf Abd' al-Rahman of Harar, claimed to be the leading figure spreading Salafism in Harar and Ethiopia (Erlich 2007, 81). Although important, his role should not be overestimated. Whereas Salafism spread from Harar to its vicinity, centres for Salafi teaching were also soon established among the Oromo of Hararge. Some have argued that the introduction of *Khat*<sup>10</sup> as a cash-crop in Hararge facilitated the increase of *hajj* among the Oromo, who in turn returned to disseminate Salafi ideas among their kinsmen, ideas which then were brought to Arsi and Bale.<sup>11</sup> Later, in the 1960s, an increasing number of Oromo from Bale and Arsi returning from religious studies in Saudi, played a pivotal role in further expanding Salafism in these areas.<sup>12</sup> Similar developments were seen in Addis Ababa and in areas such as Wollo – although to a lesser degree. This means that Salafism in Ethiopia from the beginning had the form of a home-grown movement, in the sense that the new ideas were disseminated by Ethiopians, and not by foreign missionaries. The ideological links to Saudi were obvious, and to some degree also the financial. Yet the important role played by locals had clear impacts on the way the Salafi doctrines were introduced into the particular locality.

The growth of the Salafi movement was to a large degree checked by the Derg regime. Guided by a Marxist ideology, the Derg sought to curb religious activities in general, yet never managing to eradicate religion. One important aspect for the movement's survival was its decentred character. There was no structured organisation which the regime could interfere in or ban; everything was on an informal basis, with the mosque as the main arena for disseminating Salafi ideas. Whereas religious change was to be temporarily postponed during the Derg, this was to change dramatically from 1991. The Salafi movement, which already had gained foothold in Oromo-speaking areas such as Bale and Arsi, soon attracted a large number of followers in these areas, and gradually gained similar support in other parts of the country; Harar, Jimma, Wollo and Addis Ababa. Obviously, the new regime's policy on religion enabling the Ethiopian Salafis to strengthen their contacts with the outside world was crucial for the expansion of the ideology; disseminated through the import of literature, by Ethiopians receiving education abroad and through a growing number of *madrasas*. In

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<sup>8</sup> The term commonly used in Ethiopia is *Wahhabi* Islam. Because its followers prefer to be called Salafis, I have chosen this term. Other terms used are *ahl al-Sunna* or *tawhid*-followers. *Tawhid* refers to the absolute oneness and singularity of Allah, something strongly emphasised in Salafi Islam. The term Salafi Islam in this context refers to the teaching of Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahab and the ideology of Saudi Arabia. It should not be confused with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Salafi movement of Muhammed Abduh and Rashid Rida in Egypt.

<sup>9</sup> Few studies have been made on the Salafi-movement in Ethiopia. For some details on its developments in Harar, Arsi, Addis Ababa, Wollo and Bale, see respectively; (Desplat 2005; Temam Haji 2002) (Abbink 2007; Bauer Oumer 2006; Østebø 2007a; Østebø 2007b).

<sup>10</sup> *Khat* (*Catha edulis*) is the name for a shrub with evergreen leaves containing an amphetamine-like stimulant. *Khat* is chewed all over the Horn of Africa, and in Yemen, giving the users a mild inebriation.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed Zekaria, personal communication; Addis Ababa 25.9.2006

<sup>12</sup> For more details on the initial development of Salafism in Arsi and Bale, see (Temam Haji 2002; Østebø 2007b).

the case of Bale, the Salafi factor was moreover felt by the arrival of the *qawettis*, Oromo returning from exile in Somalia in the early 1990s, advocating reform in line with Salafi doctrines.<sup>13</sup>

In the capital, it was the *Ethiopian Muslim Youth Association* that became the main promoter of the Salafi ideology. Established in the early 1990s and led by Sheikh Sayid Ahmed Mustafa and Muhammed Usman successively, the association had initially only loose connections with Salafi Islam. However, as funding from Saudi increased, and links with the *World Association of Muslim Youth* (WAMY) in Riyadh were established, the Salafi affiliation became more obvious. As observed by one of my informants; 'The Saudis were the only ones making funds available at that time'. Also important was *Islamic Da'wa & Knowledge Association*. Established in 1992 by Sheikh Tahir Abdulqadir from Bale, it played a decisive role in translating and publishing religious literature, constructing mosques and supporting various forms of *da'wa*.<sup>14</sup> Besides these organisations, the Salafi-movement was represented by a group of Oromo *ulama* returning from Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s and settling in Aiyir Tena, one of the suburbs of Addis Ababa. Individuals such as Dr. Jeylan Galata were highly respected in Salafi circles throughout the country, and were moreover exerting substantial influence on the young Oromo residing in Addis Ababa. Although both the individuals and the association mentioned above received funds from Saudi and the Gulf states, the financial links were of a highly informal or private character, making it difficult to determine the exact size of the funds, how they were channelled and how they were spent.<sup>15</sup> A good example in this regard is the Bale International University soon to be constructed at the cost of 105 mill Birr (US\$ 12, 3 mill), where Dr. Jeylan Galata is mentioned as one of several 'Ethiopian investors together with some Kuwaiti businessmen'.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, a more formalised relationship between the Saudis and Ethiopian Salafis is found in the *Awaliyah School & Mission Centre*. Supported by the Saudi-controlled *World Muslim League* (MWL) since 1966, the formal ownership of the school was in 1993 transferred to *International Islamic Relief Organisation*, a branch of MWL (Bauer Oumer 2006, 79; Nega Aba Jebal 1986). Although foreign funding has played an important role, its impact should not be overestimated. Salafism in Ethiopia has to a large degree been based on local resources, where many of the constructed mosques, the *madrasas* and the various forms of *da'wa* have been financed locally. Further, as a result of global and regional events, the Ethiopian government has in congruence with US policy curbed much of Saudi's activities and cash-flow into Ethiopia, reducing its influence considerably (Shinn 2005, 110).

The second main reform-movement is the *Jama'at al-Tabligh*. Internationally, this is the world's largest Islamic *da'wa* movement, established by Sheikh Muhammed Iliyas in India in 1929.<sup>17</sup> With hardly any studies available, our knowledge on its history and activities in Ethiopia is very limited.<sup>18</sup> Some reports claim that the *Tabligh* was introduced to Ethiopia by South African and Kenyan Indian *Tabligh*-missionaries in the 1970s. Their activities were facilitated by a certain Sheikh Musa, resulting in the expansion of the movement among the Gurage community in Addis Ababa. Similar to the Salafi-movement, the *Tabligh's* activities remained limited during the Derg-period, before the movement emerged with increased strength after 1991. Led by its founder in Ethiopia, Sheikh Musa and with its centre (*markaz*) in the Kolfe area, the *Tabligh* has grown to be

<sup>13</sup> During the fighting between Somali guerrillas and the government leading up to the Ogaden war (1977-78), many Oromo sided with the Somali; their defeat forcing a substantial part of the Oromo population of Bale to flee to Somalia where they lived as refugees throughout the Derg period.

<sup>14</sup> *Da'wa* – the Islamic call usually signifies propagation and preaching with the objective to bring a person to Islam (or to the correct observance of Islam).

<sup>15</sup> Erlich has discussed the issue of Saudi funding, where according to *Muslim World League* sources, money has been spent on education, construction of mosques and various development activities. Yet very little is mentioned on the size of the funding and how it was channelled (Erlich 2007, 186f).

<sup>16</sup> For more details, see (The Ethiopian Herald 2007).

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed study on the *Tabligh* movement in general, see (Sikand 2002)

<sup>18</sup> This section on the *Tabligh* is based on my own limited fieldwork and research done by Bauer Oumar (Bauer Oumer 2006).

one of the main movements of Islamic reform in Ethiopia. The *da'wa* is now conducted in a more organised and extensive manner, with *Tabligh* missionaries being sent out to various parts of the country; either on three- or forty-days journeys; sometimes in small groups, sometimes in busloads. In compliance with *Tabligh* principles, the missionaries are making house calls (*jawla*), calling people to attend the prayers in the mosque. *Tabligh* groups (*jama'a*) are subsequently established in the mosque, serving as bases for further *da'wa*. Also in accordance with the *Tabligh's* principle of self-reliance, the missionaries of the *Tabligh* are supporting themselves, making the movement independent from any outside funding. On the other hand, the movement has improved its contact with the wider *Tabligh* world by receiving *Tabligh* missionaries, particularly from the Indian communities in Kenya and South Africa, and by sending representatives to annual *Tabligh* conferences in Pakistan. When Sheikh Musa passed away in 2002, the leadership was organised in a more collective manner, with a committee exerting the overall responsibility. Yet, in spite of increased outreach-activities, the *Tabligh*-movement in Ethiopia has largely remained confined within the Gurage community in Addis Ababa. Attempts to establish centres in other areas have met resistance, particularly in Oromiya, where the Salafis are dominating.

The third movement of reform emerging in the early 1990s, here labelled as the Intellectualist movement, is somewhat difficult to categorise. Highly informal and devoid of any organisational structure, it evolved around certain individuals advocating a set of ideas rather than initiating a particular movement. Surfacing in the campuses of Addis Ababa University and at other institutions of higher learning, it soon attracted students in large numbers, thus acting unofficially as the Muslim Student-Movement. Organised in small *jama'as*, and led by individual figures referred to as *amirs*, and by offering lectures and initiating study-circles, the movement became important in fighting for the rights of Muslim students. Outside the campuses, the movement was able to exert influence through public lectures and contributions in the *Bilal* magazine in the early 1990s. Further, prominent members of the movement have been active publishing books through the *Najashi Publishers*. Although prominent individuals within the movement still are disseminating their ideas through lectures and seminars in Addis Ababa and its surroundings, the movement has lost much of its strength in the campuses. Instead, it has remained a rather elitist phenomenon; its leaders and followers mainly being young university graduates and urban intellectuals.

## Attracting audiences

Attempts to construe the recruitment to contemporary Islamic movements have often forwarded factors such as the failure of modernisation (Dekmejian 1995; Faksh 1997), socio-economic strains like poverty and illiteracy (Ansari 1984; Munson Jr 1986), the influence of Western culture (Keddie 1994) and alienation from both traditional virtues and modern life (Waltz 1986). Although such factors are of clear relevance, they have to be situated in the particular context under question. Seeking to understand the appeal Islamic reform movements have in Ethiopia, we therefore need to consider the traditional position of Islam, the impact of the country's recent political history and the political and cultural climate created by the current regime.

Recent political developments have had great impacts on a whole generation of Ethiopians. Starting in the last decades of the imperial period, a process of increased modernisation moulded the borders of locality, bringing the trans-local context closer, and thus opening up for increased cultural and religious plurality. The pace of this development changed dramatically with the coming of the *Derg*; promoting schooling, initiating a vast literacy campaign and transforming both political and cultural institutions by organising the people into numerous modern bureaucratic associations. The *Derg* moreover contributed to the introduction of modernism as a concept in the minds of the people, where the past was interpreted by the present, and the future was something to be shaped by the

labour of man. In other words, reality was to be seen as increasingly rationalised, which inevitably came to challenge existing systems explaining this reality, and to weaken previous cultural virtues and cultural institutions. Either because of the regime's revisionist policy, where they viewed most of previous culture as remnants of a feudal past, or because of the state-enforced modernism, the past lost much of its relevance in the minds of people – particularly among the young generation. Attending modern education and exposed to Marxist ideology, this generation found themselves alienated from their past, yet at the same time not full-fledged Marxist converts. Then, as the Lenin-statues were toppled and the Red-stars were removed in 1991, a whole generation of Ethiopians to a large degree found themselves in what can be characterised as a cultural vacuum, highly receptive of new orientations. Consequently, these previous experiences came to produce fertile ground for new orientations – such as the movements discussed here – to attract a variety of audiences.

Recruitment to the Salafi movement has been rather limited in urban areas. The main arena of recruitment in towns has been the mosque, where particular mosques dominated by a Salafi *imam* or home to individuals providing teaching along Salafi lines, became important bridgeheads for the *da'wa*. In Addis Ababa the *da'wa* is also done through the spreading of audio- and video-cassettes. In contrast, the movement had more success in the rural areas, where it has been able to recruit a large number of young males, particularly in Oromo-speaking areas. Many are recruited through an increasingly elaborated system of rural religious schools (*jama'a*) dominated by a Salafi *ulama* either educated in Saudi, or disciples of others with training from Saudi. Taught in the Qu'ran and the main Islamic subjects (*ilm*), they are simultaneously exposed to Salafi doctrines and in turn becoming adherents to this form of Islam. Yet at the same time, this network of rural religious schools represents a continuation of Islam where it serves to transfer and maintain Islamic religious knowledge. In an environment, such as in the rural areas of Oromiya where Islamic scholarship traditionally remained largely superficial and where practical adherence to the main principles of Islam was nominal, Salafism has thus become the channel for a renewed focus on religious virtues, and could therefore be seen as a continuous process of Islamisation. Furthermore, Salafism could also be construed as means to social change. In contrast to the urban youth, who had better access to higher education, the limited possibility for those from the rural areas makes religious education the only pathway for social mobility. Important in this regard is that while both the urban and the rural youth may be disconnected from their cultural past, those in towns are exposed to a variety of alternatives, whereas in the rural areas – choice is limited to an orientation of a religious character. Upon completing their training, many of the students (*darasa*) take up teaching, whereas some will continue as farmers, get engaged in petty-trading or simply migrate to urban areas. This means there is a rather high degree of turn-over in the recruitment, and it seems clear that although most of them would continue subscribe to the Salafi ideas, many are likely to lose the initial zealotry. However, those who migrate to larger urban areas, like Addis Ababa, usually find their settlement in areas already dominated by Salafis, which in turn enables them to maintain their religious affiliation.

As already mentioned, the *Tabligh* in Ethiopia is dominated by the Gurage Muslims, much involved in trading and found in the Mercato area of Addis Ababa. The movement seems to have an appeal to most members within this community, regardless of age, sex or social status. Yet, those getting involved in *da'wa* are likely to be young males; students or employees in various sectors. Whereas the traders may be engaged in at least the short-term *da'wa*, they are more important in upholding the *Tabligh*-principle of self-reliance; providing financial support for the activities. The *Tabligh* is also able to benefit from the extensive network of Gurage traders found all over the country, having an important supportive function for the travelling *Tabligh* missionaries.

The Intellectualist movement in Ethiopia is in contrast to the Salafi movement an urban phenomenon. Its base is the urban youth who have attended the formal school-system before entering higher education in the capital. Thus, rather than being exposed to religious education,

these are individuals exposed to urban life, subject to secular education and assumingly being more acquainted with modernity than their co-religionists from the rural areas. Entering the campuses where they received lectures on religion and were encouraged to study books about Islam, they soon found themselves exposed to various trends within Islam and involved in discussions about religious virtues and Islam in relation to different aspects of modern life. Thus, the movement has an intellectualist characteristic from the beginning, stimulating the recipients to study and analyse Islam in relation to their own life-situation. Prior to joining the movement, many of the adherents to the Intellectualist movement were indifferent to the obligatory religious duties and rather uninformed about the basic principles of Islam. Moreover, dissatisfied with and alienated from the Islam of their parents, this was often described as a 'superstitious' form of Islam. In other words, the movements found fertile ground among those disconnected from their past, disgruntled with their own lack of religious orientation and caught up in a contradictory modern world.

The emergence of these movements and their interactions with their audience, clearly demonstrate how the process of objectification led to the development of multiple ideological directions. As these movements occurred in different spatial and cultural contexts, often representing the sole ideological alternative, they engaged their prospective audience in a dialectical process of creating a sense of meaning and belonging in a largely fragmented reality. Meaning is obviously not to be restricted to a cognitive sphere, rather 'what is important in most humans in their everyday lives is not to have a well reasoned and coherent world view but rather to have one that functions emotionally' (Thurfjell 2003, 28). Where these movements provided the members with ways to articulate allegiance to the Islamic virtues and to construct a sense of belonging, it is interesting to see how the different movements, with their particular ideological emphasis, are attracting followers from different sectors of the society. Yet, it needs also to be underscored that meaning also has its more mundane flavour. Whereas the rural youth are using the Salafi *jama'as* as a tool for social mobility, recruitment to the movements is also connected with affinity and loyalty to another issue of belonging; that of ethnicity – which we will return to more in details later.

## Ideological content

As the word 'reform' implies, the main objective for any reform movement is to initiate change. This involves evaluative perceptions of the existent reality, a determined agenda and a strategy for change and reflections on an idealised future.<sup>19</sup> Constituting the movement's message, this must be articulated and disseminated in a manner resonating with a prospective audience and arranged in a certain way to produce intersubjective meaning and facilitate the movement's goals. This process has its clear reciprocal character, where the protagonists of an ideology on one hand are emphasising certain aspects having particular relevance in a given setting, and where the recipients on the other are choosing and selectively interpreting parts of the system seen as relevant to their locality and as providing meaningful answers to their questions. Through this interactive process of negotiations, both the protagonists and the audience draw from indigenous symbols, language and identities – as well as from trans-local ideologies. As various movements, like these under question here, are framed in different ideological narratives and are moreover interacting with disparate audiences, the outcome is bound to be of a complex heterogeneous character.

As expected, the Salafis have been the most ardent critics of traditional Islamic practices in Ethiopia. The movement has fiercely attacked what they regard as inclusion of indigenous elements

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<sup>19</sup> Introducing the term 'ideological vision', Gouldner connects the phenomena of religion and ideology, constituting a modern construct focused on man's effort to make change the world (Gouldner 1976). Elaborating on this, Lawrence claims that contemporary reform movements represent *religious ideologies* by which practices and aspirations are 'framed within a discourse that authorizes action through scriptural, creedal and moral references' (Lawrence 1989, 97).

and Sufi interpretations of Islam, in particular the pilgrimages to various shrines and celebrations of *mawlid*. These practices, as well as Sufism in general – the main antagonism to Salafism, has been refuted as *shirk*; as deviations from the true faith. Moreover, the Salafis have agitated for a stricter observance of Islam, with the inclusion of various aspects of the *sunna* as compulsory (*wajib*), notably the growing of beard, the wearing of trousers above the ankles (*isbal*) and females covering their faces (*niqab*). This prescribed observance of the *sunnah* has inevitably produced conflicts between senior and more zealous young Salafis, where the former are accused of corruption and religious laxness, and where the latter are labelled as too extreme. The Salafi-movement in Ethiopia has in general subscribed to the mainstream Salafi doctrines of Saudi Arabia, where prominent figures such as Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Abdallah bin Baz, Sheikh Muhammed bin Salih al-Uthaymin and the Albanian Sheikh Muhammed Nasr al-Din al-Albany are highly regarded. However, with the appearance of the *Takfir wal Hijrah* group in 1994-95, it seemed that the Salafi-movement would move in a new direction.<sup>20</sup> Introduced by a certain Sheikh Muhammed Amin returning from exile in Sudan 1992, the movement grew strong in the northern town of Gondar in the years 1994-1997 – before it spread to Addis Ababa, gaining foothold in the mosque in Terro, a northern suburb of the city. The *Takfir* was soon able to attract quite a number of followers among the young generation, and for a period the issue of *Takfir* was on everybody's lips. Distancing themselves from the Christians, they also severed their connections to other Muslims, refusing to pray with them. In accordance with the principles of *Takfir* in general; the criticism of *shirk* among fellow Muslims, who subsequently are labelled as non-believers (*kafirs*), the *Takfir* even refuted other Salafis as *kafirs*, including the leading Salafi *ulama* of Addis Ababa. Moving in an increasingly exclusivist direction, the group consequently found themselves cut off by the rest of the Salafi movement. As the Salafi *ulama* of Aiyr Tena publicly denounced the movement, and a young scholar named Hassan Taju in 2002 published a book fiercely criticising *Takfir*, the group lost much of its momentum, and when its main leader passed away in 2004, *Takfir* lost its real strength. A more recent schism was introduced by the so-called Madhkaliyyah group, adhering to the Salafi scholar, Rabi ibn Hadi al-Madhkali of Saudi.<sup>21</sup> Organised around a certain radiologist in Mercato, the group established their own organisation, *Najiah* (salvation) in the end of 2006.<sup>22</sup> Very little is known about the Madhkaliyyah group, other than that they are seen as advocating for a stricter version of Salafism in opposition to the more established part of the movement, as well as being ardently critical to the teaching of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In accordance with the movement's general principles, the *Tabligh* in Ethiopia has sought to enhance the Muslims' commitment to Islam, by calling them to attend the prayers in the mosque, to observe the fasting and to uphold the six main principles of *Tabligh*.<sup>23</sup> The *Tabligh* movement has in general emphasised the study of Islam, arguing that knowledge should not be limited to the domain of the *ulama*. Yet, the study of Islam within *Tabligh* in Ethiopia has not been much elaborated, signifying that *Tabligh* is a movement focusing more on the practical aspects of *da'wa* and less on doctrinal questions. In Ethiopia, the movement is not represented by any *ulama* or school, it does not provide religious training on a higher level and is generally avoiding debates on ideology. In fact, the anonymous character of the *Tabligh* has made the movement to be overlooked

<sup>20</sup> *Takfir wal Hijrah* first emerged in Egypt in 1977, where its leader, Shukri Mustafa advocated a radical interpretation of Islam, defying any Muslim except his own followers as *kafirs*. In Sudan there are reports that the group was behind several attacks on mosques in the 1990s, and that they tried to assassinate Osama bin Laden in 1994. Most of the *Takfir* activists were subsequently killed in confrontations with Sudanese security forces, as was their leader. See (Carney 2005, 122)

<sup>21</sup> Sheikh Rabi ibn Hadi al-Madhkali is a mainstream, quietist scholar close to the Salafi establishment in Saudi. Through his writing, he has launched staunch criticism upon the Muslim Brotherhood and Sayid Qutb. Sheikh Rabi also has his own webpage: [www.rabee.net](http://www.rabee.net).

<sup>22</sup> According to information given to me in an interview 13 October 2006, the Madhkaliyyah group was working on establishing this organisation. I have not been able to verify if it in fact has been established.

<sup>23</sup> These six principles were formulated by Sheikh Muhammed Ilyas, the founder of *Tabligh* – said to guide the believer in his or her daily life (Ali 2003; Elahi 1989).

by most observers. The *Tabligh* has moreover not voiced much criticism towards 'traditional' Islamic practices; rather they are allowed to continue within the movement. The migrant Gurage community in Addis Ababa has brought many of their Sufi practices with them, where in particular veneration of the main Gurage saints are sought to be maintained within the urban community. In turn, this signifies the movement's highly pragmatic character; combining reform with certain flexibility towards the past, and the incorporation and rereading of Sufi elements within a *Tabligh* framework.

Initially linked to the *Tabligh* movement, the Intellectualist movement gradually developed an ideological attachment to the Muslim Brotherhood, where the views of Hassan al-Banna, and in particular that of Yusuf al-Qaradawi were disseminated among its followers. This was reflected through the spread of Muslim Brotherhood literature, through public lectures and through contributions in *Bilal* magazine. Yet the Intellectualists were careful never to mention the names of the Muslim Brotherhood or its ideologues, and were moreover often using the pen-name, Najat Abd al-Qadir when writing in *Bilal* (Hussein Ahmed 1998, 98). This was partly done to avoid becoming too closely associated with a particular movement, and partly out of fear that being associated with the Muslim Brotherhood would spark interventions from the side of the government. It needs to be noted that the Muslim Brotherhood was never formally established in Ethiopia. Rather, it was the ideas of the movement that were disseminated; ideas being selectively chosen and interpreted within the particular Ethiopian context. In contrast to the two other movements, the Intellectualist movement has repeatedly emphasised Islam as a resource for man's life in the temporal and secular world. Islam is perceived as a comprehensive religion, being relevant for all aspects of life, and where the Muslim is thus expected to be active in various sectors of societal and political life. The believer should participate in the capacity of being a member of society, where his or her conduct is to be guided by Islam, and whereby the society will be influenced by the Islamic virtues. Furthermore, the Intellectualists have been active working for a better parity with the Christian population. Referring to past discrimination, they are arguing for the need to mend the past injustices and work for equal representation of Muslims in public life. At the same time they are also emphasising the need for tolerance and peaceful co-existence between the country's religious groups; claiming that this can only be achieved through just and equal representation of the two groups. In addition to this underlining of the more mundane aspects, the Intellectualists have moreover a clear inclination towards the more spiritual side of Islam. Similar to the Salafis, the Intellectualists are challenging the traditional popularised versions of Ethiopian Sufism, yet acknowledging Sufism to be a legitimate part of Islamic tradition and necessary for man's piety. In contrast to the 'traditional' Sufism practiced in Ethiopia, a sort of 'modern' Sufism is advocated, not affiliated to any *tariqah*, but which is focused on individual religious practices as enhancing one's spiritual life in a materialistic world. As expressed by one of my informants; 'Sufism is a way to combine modern life and religion. With Sufism I can live close to Allah, it gets personal'.

The Intellectualists' inclination towards Sufism is a clear illustration of how locality contributes in shaping the ideology informing the very same locality. Coming from areas with an elaborated tradition of Islamic (Sufi) scholarship, such as Wollo, its adherents have come to view this tradition as an important resource in the reconfiguration of Islamic virtues and symbols within a modern setting. Furthermore, a similar tendency is found in their view of the Muslim Brotherhood; underscoring Hassan al-Banna's linking to the Sufi *turuq* in Egypt. Consequently, indigenous traditions are re-constructed into the present, made to fit impulses from a different context; both being negotiated and moulded within the cultural locality of the Intellectualists.

## Islam, inter-religious relations and politics

Yet, one of the most noticeable areas in which locality affects the ideological content of these movements is the relationship to the Christian population and to Ethiopian politics. Many Ethiopian and foreign observers have interpreted current developments on Islam as a process where Islam in Ethiopia is becoming increasingly politicised, and where so-called Islamic fundamentalism is said to surface in the ranks of Ethiopian Muslims.<sup>24</sup> With reference to the growth in the number of mosques all over the country and to the increasing number of Muslims holding governmental and public positions, Ethiopian Muslims are accused of aspiring for political power based on radical religious ideas. Quite strong statements are forwarded in the public debate, where *madrasas* are charged of being ‘brain washing sessions and jihad factories nurturing potential bin Ladens...’ and where ‘innocent Ethiopian kids are taken to various countries in the Middle East for military training, and then return home to participate in the meticulously planned and widely coordinated jihad’ (Alem Zele-Alem 2003). Consequently, currents within the Islamic community are seen to have severe negative impacts for the Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia, a relationship which historically has largely been devoid of any major conflicts. Claiming that Ethiopia’s ‘contemporary religious equilibrium is collapsing very quickly’, and that ‘contemporary religious militancy should be seen as a wholly new phenomenon and a threat to peace, stability and independence’, a sense of fear is clearly discernable among the Christian population.<sup>25</sup>

The Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia have repeatedly been celebrated as peaceful, tolerant and pragmatic. Yet, as also Hussein Ahmed has argued, there is a clear need for a reappraisal of this relationship (Hussein Ahmed 2006), something which certainly becomes imperative as the 1990s saw an increment of inter-religious frictions. Tensions between Christians and Muslims have often revolved around the construction of mosques and churches, and in relation to public celebration of religious holidays.<sup>26</sup> Allocations of plots for churches and mosques have produced protests from Muslims and Christians respectively, in some cases leading to clashes between the two communities. Already in 1992 controversies arose in the ancient town of Axum over the Muslims’ request for permission to construct a mosque there. Claiming that Axum was a sacred place, the Christian clerics strongly opposed the proposal. Subsequent clashes were quelled by the security forces, and still there is no mosque in Axum. Conflicts over the construction of mosques and churches have recurred all through the last decade, with the latest one occurring in August 2006 in downtown Addis Ababa, where the demolition of an alleged unlawfully built mosque led to angry demonstrations. Controversies over celebrations of religious holidays have often been sparked by spatial proximity, like that of Kamise (Wollo) where a procession of Christians celebrating Epiphany came too close to the Muslims preparing for prayer at the town’s mosque, resulting in skirmishes with casualties on both sides. Tensions between Christians and Muslims clearly exacerbated in the fall of 1996, as violent clashes erupted in Jimma and Begi (Wollega). Both the scale of the conflicts and the level of violence were surprisingly high. There were reports of a group calling themselves *Kharijites*, said to have connections to radical groups in other parts of the country and even to Sudan and Yemen, torching numerous churches and even forcefully trying to convert Christians to Islam.<sup>27</sup> Although further investigations need to be made, the conflict was apparently initiated by elements within the Salafi movement, and it is generally assumed that radical segments of the movement have been fuelling other conflicts as well. In accordance with the general Salafi notion of exclusiveness; both towards Christians and non-Salafi Muslims, groups

<sup>24</sup> For more details on the public Ethiopian discourse, see (Alem Zele-Alem 2003; Hibret Selamu 2004; Johannes Sebhata 2004) For more details on the contributions by foreign observers, see (De Waal 2004; Shinn 2005)

<sup>25</sup> Medhane Tadesse, author of the book *Al-Itihad: Political Islam and Black Economy in Somalia*, quoted by David Shinn (Shinn 2005, 98).

<sup>26</sup> For a survey of such incidents, see (Hussein Ahmed 2006)

<sup>27</sup> Lit. “those who go out” or “outlaws”. The *Kharijites* were originally a group supporting Ali in his struggle for the caliphate, and has been characterised as extremist, rejecting any form of authority.

such as the already mentioned *Takfir* and others have advocated for a stricter separation from the Christians. Important to note, however, is that such sentiments have gained meagre support among the Salafis at large. Neither the main Salafi *ulama* in Addis Ababa nor Salafis in the rural areas are forwarding views of segregation and enmity towards the Christians.

Although the conflicts in Jimma and Begi were more coordinated than previous ones, and spanned over a wider geographical area, inter-religious conflicts in Ethiopia have retained a local character and are not part of any nationally organised movement. Many of the conflicts, particularly those in the southern areas, need to be related to a broader discourse of historical enmity, which today is framed within an ethno-nationalist narrative. On the other hand, the emergence of a stronger consciousness among the Muslim population, where past injustices based on religion increasingly are being articulated, surely demonstrates that religion is becoming more explicitly distinguished in the conflictual pattern.

Rhetoric of a political nature is overtly absent among the Salafis in Ethiopia. Rather than politics, the Salafis are focusing on the religious sphere; encouraging a strict adherence to the principle of *tawhid* and avoidance of Sufism and indigenous elements within Islam. Although ideologically linked to the Salafi doctrines underscoring the *shari'a* as the only legitimate law, the Salafis do not advocate a similar system for Ethiopia. Recognising the religious plurality of Ethiopia, the prevailing view among Ethiopian Salafis is that religious freedom for all could only be secured under a secular government. Although an expansion of the *shari'a*-courts jurisdiction would be welcomed by most Salafis, and where more radical elements even would include corporal punishments, the Salafis at large realise that the infusion of the *shari'a* into the governing system would be impossible in Ethiopia.

An even clearer avoidance of politics is found within the *Tabligh* movement. Statements made by the *Tabligh* movement in general indicate a negative view on politics, where the *Tabligh* has argued for Islamisation of society by the individuals' efforts; to lead others to Islam and to uphold the Islamic virtues. Restricted to conducting *da'wa*, the movement has thus claimed to be outside of politics.<sup>28</sup> However, networks created by the organisation have in many areas been exploited by various Islamist groupings (Kepel 2002, 45), creating a situation where it often has been equated with Islamism. In both Somalia and Uganda this has been the case, where Salafi elements have managed to develop *Tabligh* into a more radical direction (Chande 2000, 355-358; International Crises Group 2005, 18). In Ethiopia, the *Tabligh* has overtly operated in compliance with the general principles of the movement, and has through its history been devoid of political engagement. Through its low profile and withdrawn to its *markaz* and to selected mosques in Addis Ababa, it has remained rather imperceptible and to a large degree secluded from any involvement in public life.

The Intellectualist movement, on the other hand, is the one with the most elaborate view on politics. Congruent with their opinion on the need for improved parity between Ethiopia's religious groups, where the Muslims are encouraged to become more involved in political and public affairs, the Intellectualists are underscoring the need for a political environment facilitating mutual respect and co-existence between the two religious groups. What is of particular interest is the Intellectualists' opinion on the nature of this environment best suited to meet the need of the Muslims of Ethiopia. Rather than voicing the views of the Muslim Brotherhood and advocating for Islam being infused into politics, they argue that the rights of the country's different religious groups could only be secured under a secular government.

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<sup>28</sup> For an enlightening discussion on *Tabligh's* relations towards political activity, see (Sikand 2006).

The views held by these movements on politics and their perception on the relationship to the Christians, clearly demonstrate how locality impinges on the flow of trans-local ideas into this very locality. Construing this dialectic interaction, the questions that consequently emerge are; what are the very factors within this locality affecting the global currents, and, how do they affect these currents?

On one hand, the long-standing religious plurality and the tradition of relatively peaceful co-existence in Ethiopia have undoubtedly been contributed in preventing escalation of inter-religious conflicts. The pattern of shared commonality on the grass-root level, a degree of mutual respect and even, in some areas, transgressions of religious boundaries, in the form of cross-religious marriages and even conversions, have served as important resources in preventing conflicts. This tradition has also influenced the Islamic movements, making them less likely to embark on a path of a conflictual character. On the other hand, the inter-religious relationship in Ethiopia has clearly affected these movements' confidence to explicitly voice their opinions in accordance with their respective ideologies. Whereas the Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia have been marked by tolerance and coexistence, one crucial aspect of this relationship is its asymmetric character, arguably constituting the main reason for the inter-religious tranquillity. Centuries with Christian dominance, a politico-cultural ideology where Christianity constituted an important part of Ethiopianness, resulted in the positioning of the Muslim as second-rate. Excluded from participating in political life, denied any representation in the form of organisations and stigmatised, the Muslims were consequently secluded from the public sphere and left protective of their limited space. This situation has deprived the Muslim community in general, and the emerging Islamic movements in particular of the necessary tradition and experience for involvement in the wider Ethiopian society.

Seen in relation to the notion of social identity, the distinction between group identification and social categorisation is of particular interest here. Whereas the former constitutes the internal and collective identification process and the latter signifies the external categorisation of and by others, the dialectics between the two has a clear reciprocal effect in the construction of social identities (Jenkins 1996, 80f). In Ethiopia, the Christian politico-cultural hegemony positioning the Muslims as subordinate has naturally made an impact on the latter's self-image, whereby internalising the categories issued by the other; the Muslim internal self-image has become a reflection of the stigmatisation by the other. This has consequently affected the Muslims' resources and confidence in their quest for increased parity and in carving out public space for themselves. Moreover, it has had clear implications for the agenda of the reform movements making them more reluctant to challenge the status-quo and causing them to refrain from articulating political views in a radical direction. For some of the reform movements, like the Salafi movement, their seclusion to rural areas, and subject to linguistic boundaries, has furthermore deprived them of the necessary resources to engage in the current societal debates.

Having said this, it needs to be noted that there are efforts made to explicitly address this inbuilt sense of inferiority and to inject a new sense of consciousness and pride into the contemporary Muslim society. In a series of articles appearing in *Bilal* (1992-93), dealing with Islam's history in Ethiopia from the *Axumite hijrah* (the early Muslims escaping to, and being granted asylum in Axum in 615 AD) to the present, it was argued that instead of referring to periods of oppressions in the past, the time was now ripe for the modern Ethiopian Muslim to start thinking about his long and glorious history, and to stand forth with pride (Carmichael 1996).

An increased number of mosques and higher representations of Muslims in public life could hardly qualify as proof for a politicisation of Islam in Ethiopia. It has not been uncommon, however, to equate demands of better representation with a politicisation of Islam, perhaps reflecting how current trends within contemporary Islam accompanied with geopolitical tensions are luring us to apply rather narrow categories which unfortunately are limiting our understanding of a dynamic and

heterogeneous phenomenon.<sup>29</sup> The case of Ethiopia clearly demonstrates how contemporary Islam consists of several ideological trends manifested in a variety of movements, and where their local manifestations are products of constant negotiations between the trans-local ideological impetus and the particularities of the locality.

## Intra-religious tensions and the question of ethnicity

Besides more fragile Christian-Muslim relations, the emergence and growth of Islamic reform movements in Ethiopia has also led to increasing intra-religious tensions. Again, we find the Salafis as the one taking the clearest exclusivist stance, expressing strong criticism towards the other movements. The Intellectualists, because of their attachment to the Muslim Brotherhood, are by the Salafis antagonised as detached from the true Islam, and repeatedly labelled as both Sufis and Shi'as – the favourite insults of the Salafis. The Intellectualists, on their part, view the Salafis as rigid literalists, as narrow-minded and as ignorant of the diversity of Islamic scholarship. They are criticised for separating themselves from the current societal debate, labelled as backward and accused of playing a destructive role in the development of the Muslim community in Ethiopia; debilitating the unity among the country's Muslims and creating unnecessary conflicts within the community. The Salafis are using similar derogatory labels upon the *Tabligh*, attacking their affiliation with Sufism, and labelling their organised *da'wa* as *bid'a* (innovation). The *Tabligh*, on the other hand, have in general kept a low profile, focusing on their *da'wa* activities and avoiding any form of confrontation. Whereas their relationship to the Salafis is rather strained, they are at ease with the Intellectualist movement. Both have a positive inclination towards Sufism, although the Intellectualists are more critical towards the popularised Sufi practices.

While a *religious* identity may have gained increased momentum in the last decade, and the notion of Islamic unity in Ethiopia on occasions can be invoked particularly with reference to the Christian community, the current discourse on ethnicity in Ethiopia has both impinged on the unanimity within the Muslim population and led to the reinforcement of existing ideological differences between the Islamic movements. With the introduction of ethnic federalism and the current regime's constitutional recognition of Ethiopia's ethnic patchwork, the question of ethnicity has become highly politicised, dominating the public debate throughout the 1990s. Arguably, the ongoing debate on ethnicity represents a much broader historical discourse over Ethiopian nationhood, where the religious dimension unfortunately has been ignored.

Religious affiliation in Ethiopia is, as in many other parts of Africa, often coinciding with membership to a particular ethnic group. This is most apparent among the Somali and the Afar where ethnic belonging is equated with being Muslim. Adherence to the reform movements is also to some degree coinciding with that of ethnic affinity. In the case of *Tabligh*, the movement's links to the Gurage community clearly demonstrates how religious and ethnic boundaries are overlapping, contributing to confining the movement within a particular ethnic group. The *Tabligh's* ethnic character must also be seen as a way of expressing the particularity of the Gurage trading-community in Addis Ababa. Whereas the Gurage, as a migrant community, would seek to demarcate boundaries towards other, either "indigenous" or other migrant groups, this has moreover been augmented by the ethnic stratification of Addis Ababa's Muslim community. In relation to the dominating Muslim groups in Addis Ababa, in particular those from Wollo and to some degree the Harari, the Gurage have held a subordinate position. Not hosting important scholars and not

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<sup>29</sup> A relevant example is Chande's discussion of various Islamic movements in East Africa. Albeit these movements are forwarding many of the same views and demands as those discussed in this paper, Chande ends up applying the tendentious label of radicalism. See (Chande 2000)

influencing the Islamic institutions, the *Tabligh* has become sort of an identity-marker and a way to carve out space for themselves.

The Intellectualist movement is in contrast not confined to any particular ethnic group. The actual ethnic composition is somewhat difficult to determine, as the movement is seemingly attracting followers from a variety of ethnic groups. On the other hand, the majority is drawn from Amharic-speaking areas, from Wollo, Gondar and other parts of northern Ethiopia.

Gaining an early foothold among the Oromo of southeast Ethiopia, the Salafi movement has since been strong in areas such as Hararge, Bale and Arsi. The movement's adherents are mainly from the Oromo population, with Salafism growing stonger in Jimma area and eastern Wollega.<sup>30</sup> The Oromo are also dominating the movement in areas outside of Oromiya, clearly seen in Air Tena, the centre for the Salafi *ulama*, where the majority of the residents are from Bale. Here, both ethnic affinity and religious affiliation are sought to be maintained, as migrants seek contact with those of the same ethnic group and with the same religious preferences. Likewise, the employees in the *Islamic Da'wa and Knowledge Association* and at the *Awaliyah School & Mission Centre* have predominantly been people from the same area. Among the Oromo, the question of ethnicity has become overtly politicised, leading to an explicit Oromo ethno-nationalism framed within the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).<sup>31</sup> Although sufficient data obviously are lacking, it is highly likely to assume that a vast majority of the Oromo support the views and policies of OLF. It is moreover clear that the Oromo Salafis are holding similar views as the rest of the Oromo people; either advocating for better representation of the Oromo within the Ethiopian state or the formation of an independent Oromo state. For example, when the OLF soldiers took control over Bale in 1991, the political preferences of both the Muslim population and the Salafi *ulama* became overtly apparent. During that summer, the main mosque in Robe (the provincial capital of Bale) was decorated with OLF flags and banners and the *ulama* were explicitly voicing their support for the movement. Describing the existing fervour when the OLF soldiers entered Robe, one of the sheikhs of Robe said; 'had it not been for the laws of Islam, we would have danced with joy'. Today, OLF enjoys similar support, both from the people and the religious leadership, revealing the strong position of Oromo ethnic nationalism in Bale. Interesting to note is that rather than the idea of the *Ummah* – a community based on religious exclusiveness, it is *Oromumma* – a community based on ethnic exclusiveness that is advocated by many of the *ulama* of Robe. One of the sheikhs went as far as saying; 'what we are talking about is a struggle for the freedom of the Oromo; an ethnic *jihad*'. Yet, at the same time, the interrelationship between religion and ethnicity remains complex. Until the last years of the Derg, the Muslim Oromo of Bale commonly referred to themselves as *Islaamaa*; as marking their religious affiliation, but also as a term defining them as an ethnic group within the locality of Bale. Today, *Islaamaa* is replaced by *Oromo*, both revealing that identity has transcended the boundary of locality, and the introduction of a conceptual distinction between religious and ethnic affiliation. Nevertheless, even if the ongoing religious changes have created a stronger Muslim identity among the Oromo, the prevailing point of orientation remains 'being Oromo'. Even the young Salafis, who put great zeal into their religious practices, subscribe to the notion of *Oromumma*, and view OLF as the legitimate liberators of the Oromo. Both among the religious leadership and the rest of the Muslim community, faith is considered an individual matter; by which man identifies himself in relation to God. Ethnicity is the collective identity marker, by which the individual identifies himself in relation to the collective; first as an Arsi Oromo, secondly as an Oromo in the wider sense and thirdly, as distinguished from other ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

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<sup>30</sup> There are some indications that the Salafi Islam is gaining support among the Silte group. So far, no studies have been made on this relationship. For some suggestions, see (Zerihun Abebe 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Formed in the early 1970s, OLF was engaged in an armed struggle against the Derg regime, and participated with Tigray People's Liberation Front and other movements in ousting the regime in 1991. OLF also constituted one of the main parties in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) formed in June 1991, but left the TGE already in February 1992. Today OLF is banned in Ethiopia as it is pursuing an armed struggle against the present regime.

Membership to a given reform movement and to a certain ethnic group can thus be seen as part of the process of identification, where the religious and ethnic aspects are having a reciprocal and reinforcing effect. This intrinsic relationship between religion and ethnicity has moreover affected the intra-religious situation within the Muslim community, enhancing the antagonism between the different reform movements. Clearly noticeable, is how the current discourse on ethnicity is situated alongside existing ideological divergence, and where references are made to symbols of both a religious and an ethnic character – consequently leading in the reinforcement of both religious and ethnic boundaries.

Categories with a clear ethnic flavour are clearly detectable among the Salafis (Oromo), which are forwarding self-representations of a clear primordial nature, emphasising the quality of the Oromo as a whole for discovering and upholding the true tenets of Islam (i.e. the Salafi doctrines of Islam). This is moreover reflected in the derogatory labels they apply on other Muslim groups in Ethiopia. In the case of *Tabligh*, the categories used by the Salafis are interchangeably drawn from a religious terminology and characteristics with clear ethnic connotations. In either way, the Gurage are equated as *Tabligh*, where they both as an ethnic group and as a religious movement are labelled as deviators of the true Islam, as Sufis and as *mushrikin*. Similar derogatory representations are used for the Muslims of Wollo; the *Wolloyyans* as a collective are seen as Sufis and neglecters of the true Islam. Also accused of religious laxness, this is something being explained by their acquiescence to the Christian Amhara. The Salafis are on the other hand despised, particularly by the Intellectualist movement as backward literalists. One of my informants described a prominent Oromo Salafi *alim* as ‘a Saudi-educated shepherd from Bale’, revealing prejudice of a clear ethnic nature. Although the Intellectualist movement has been the movement most explicitly advocating Muslim unity regardless of ethnic affiliation, arguing that Islam is to transcend the boundaries of ethnicity, the movement appears to adhere to the notion of a centralised and unitary Ethiopia, a view commonly held by the Amhara population; of a unitary and centralised country, in contrast to the federal structure recognising Ethiopia’s ethnic pluralism. This ethno-religious diversity was further detectable in the course of Ethiopia’s interventions in Somalia in the latter part of 2006. In general, there was a clear, yet silent opposition to the war from the country’s Muslim community, but had the fighting escalated, it is clear that this could easily have divided the Muslims of Ethiopia. The Muslims of the north, harbouring a stronger nationalistic sentiment, would have been more supportive to the regime, while the Muslims in the south, the Oromo and obviously the Somali – would have been more opposed to the intervention. Instead, they would have supported the Somali claim for *Greater Somalia* as legitimate, and seen prolonged unrest in the southern areas as an opportunity to strengthen their own claims for independence.

In turn, this leads us to the question of the force of Islam in transcending local boundaries. What seems apparent is that the lack of trans-ethnic and trans-regional cooperation is affecting the potential Islam has as a force for wider allegiance. Contrary to the views held by most Muslims in general of Islam being a religion transcending any boundary in uniting the faithful, the case of Ethiopia reveals the recognition of diversity not only within the Ethiopian society, but also among the Muslims, something not even a trans-local movement of reform like Salafi Islam has managed to supersede. Illustrating the recurrent strength of locality in an overriding process of globalisation, the case of Ethiopia certainly reveals the power of inherent boundaries, and how they can be re-invoked and reinterpreted for the purpose of constructing new identities. Where some writers have argued that the prevailing strength of the ethnic diversity would hinder the future growth of a trans-national politicised Islam in Ethiopia (Abbas Haji Gnamo 2002, 114; Abbink 1998, 123), I would claim that such a conclusion may be too hastened. The post-1991 period, marked by increased communications with the wider Islamic world has created potentials for the evolvement of trans-local and trans-national Islamic movements. Yet again; it is the currents within the locality marred with events on the trans-local that will determine the future.

## Conclusion

The Islamic reform movements discussed here have been the carriers of a wide range of activities within the post-1991 Ethiopian Muslim community. These movements have to a large degree reshaped the position of Islam in Ethiopia in a way unprecedented in history. In addition, they have also been pivotal channels for the re-construction of identity for the country's Muslims. Through this process of identification, the issue of religious identity has become more articulated and objectified; involving the recognition of differences and the demarcation of boundaries; both intra- and inter-religious, which in turn have been marred with the rather politicised discourse on ethnicity. As movements of religious resurgence focusing on the revival of Islamic virtues among the believers, they have been pivotal in providing points of orientation and meaning, and moreover mending the discontinuity of identity. This particular case also demonstrates how the flow of ideas into a locality involves a dialectic process where ideological imperatives, political discourses and inherent affinities mutually and reciprocally inform and affect each other. My hope is that a case-study as this could serve as an example for the need to recognise Islamism as a heterogeneous phenomenon only to be fully understood in light of a variety of contexts. Whereas contemporary Islamic movements in Ethiopia have been charged of having a political agenda, I have argued that these movements are less inclined to struggle for the inclusion of Islam in politics than assumed. Radical Islamic ideas may have limited support among the Muslims of Ethiopia as long as the ethnic card remains prevalent, yet it remains clear, however, that both developments on the global and regional arenas together with the inter-religious legacy of the Ethiopian past *could* contribute to radicalise Islam, and to increase inter-religious tensions. Therefore, recognising the role and force of religion in contemporary Ethiopia becomes imperative.

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## SUMMARY

Ethiopia's new political climate (since 1991) has enhanced the Muslims' opportunities for religious expressions, clearly seen through the surfacing of several Islamic reform movements. These movements; the Salafi movement, the Tabligh movement and an Intellectualist revivalist movement have proven crucial for a certain process of objectification of religious affiliation, and have moreover served as channels for the search for belonging and coherent meaning among the Muslims. Discussing the movements' socio-cultural composition and their ideological content, this paper pays attention to how features of locality interact with trans-local ideological currents, reciprocally affecting each other. Of particular interest in the Ethiopian case is the explicit avoidance of any political agenda, a distinct intermarriage with a discourse on ethnicity, where the latter has contributed to complex processes of constructing and demarcating religious- and ethnic-based boundaries. The paper thus seeks to demonstrate the complex interrelationship between global currents and local factors; all contributing to the heterogenisation of contemporary Islam.

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