

Islam, Ethnicity and Reformism in the Horn of Africa

TERJE ØSTEBØ

Much of my research in 2013 has been devoted to three parallel projects. The first focused on previous Islamic practices in Ethiopia, represented by *jinn*/spirit possession cults – and encounters with contemporary Salafi reformism. Pointing to how such earlier practices have been discredited by the reformers, the project also demonstrated a certain degree of continuation in which conceptions of – and practices related to – spirits have been re-appropriated. The result of the project will be published in *Contemporary Islam* in 2014.

The second project called “Claims for Authority” was about contestations of power among the leadership at the shrine of Sheikh Hussein in Bale, Ethiopia. This is one of the most important Muslim shrines in Ethiopia, and has for decades been ridden by intense power-struggles. My project analyzed this struggle, and demonstrated how different actors are utilizing and combining narratives we commonly would label as either traditional or modern in a way that makes it difficult to maintain a strict dichotomy between the two. The result of this project will be published in *Journal of Islamic Studies* in 2014.

My third and long-term project has been on religion and ethnicity in the Horn of Africa, focusing on the so-called Somali and Oromo liberation movements struggling for various forms of autonomy for Ethiopian Somalis and Oromo. The aim of the research is to provide much-needed empirical knowledge and new perspectives on the nature and developments of the Somali and Oromo ethno-nationalist movements in the southeastern parts of Ethiopia. It will also provide a more nuanced understanding of inter-religious relations in Ethiopia/Horn of Africa, in which I challenge the assumption that Ethiopia is a model for peaceful inter-religious



co-existence, and demonstrate how the historical dominance of Christianity as a political culture and state-ideology has produced a lasting asymmetric relationship and consequently antagonistic attitudes between Christians and Muslims.

Through my engagement in the International Law and Policy Institute (Oslo, Norway) I have started working on the religious dimension in three major research-projects: Ethiopia: Consolidating Peace, or Emerging New Conflicts?; Ethiopia’s Foreign Policy; and a project on conflict and mediation in Zanzibar. These projects are funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the US State Department, respectively.

2013 also saw the publication of the book *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics and Islamic Reformism* edited together with Patrick Desplat (Cologne University). The book focuses on changes with regard to the Muslim

communities in post-1991 Ethiopia, including intra-religious dynamics within the Muslim communities, Islam intersecting with Ethiopian public and political spheres, and Islam in Ethiopia in relation to the geopolitical discourses in the wider Horn of Africa.

Terje Østebø is assistant professor in the Center for African Studies and the Department of Religion.