
RESEARCH ON RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND CONFLICT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

TERJE ØSTEBØ

Spring 2017 saw the final output of a research project on Islam, politics, and the question of moderation in Ethiopia which I had worked on for some years. The output was in the form of a journal article co-authored with Walleign Shemsedin and published in the *Journal of Modern African Studies*. I have since then devoted my research time to my larger book project tentatively called *Islaama vs. Amhara: Religion, Ethnicity, and Conflict in Ethiopia*. I was awarded a sabbatical leave for the academic year 2017-18, which have enabled me to devote all my time to this project. Offering an in-depth analysis of the well-known armed insurgency in Ethiopia's region of Bale, the book incorporates religion as a variable, and seeks to situate religion in relation to ethnicity and broader issues relevant for both the formation of identities and so-called identity-based conflicts. It also discusses local factors relevant for understanding the insurgency, as well as relating it to similar movements within the broader context of the Horn. Demonstrating that religion (Islam vs. Christianity) remained an important dimension of the conflict, the book firmly situates this as an integrative part of broader social realities. Interrogating epistemological underpinnings and existing perspectives around religious and ethnic identities, it forward alternative suggestions for how to better theorize around the relationship between religion and ethnicity. A key point here is to recognize the embodied and emplaced nature of human existence, which means that religious and ethnic belonging must be seen in relation to embodied human relations and continuums between a cultural and material world.

I spent a month in Ethiopia doing fieldwork related to this project during summer 2017, and an additional two weeks in Ethiopia in December 2017. Most of the field-work was devoted to interviews of former members of the insurgency



movement, as well as archival studies. I moreover spent three weeks as a guest-researcher at the University of Bergen in fall 2017. I have also been able to share the findings of this book projects a through guest-lecture at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London in spring 2017, at a workshop at the University of Oslo in October 2017, at the African Studies Association's Annual Meeting, and at the American Anthropological Association – both in November 2017.

In addition to this book project, I am working together with a colleague and a UF undergraduate student on a project on mapping violent attacks connected to so-called Islamic extremists in the Horn of Africa. The project uses the ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data) dataset, and examines the period between 2007 and 2017. The project seeks to provide statistical data that will give us a better understanding of the possible increase of religiously-related violent incident in the broader Horn of Africa, and examine the nature and dimensions related to this.

I have moreover continued to be consulted by various government institutions, and participated in a seminar on Countering Violent Extremism in Africa and in the briefing of the incoming U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia, both organized by the U.S. Department of State.

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