

# RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND CONFLICT IN ETHIOPIA

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I was fortunate to be awarded sabbatical leave during last academic year, enabling me to finalize a book project which had been in the making for many years. The book is tentatively called *Islaama vs. Amhara: Religion, Ethnicity, and Conflict in Ethiopia*. It offers an in-depth analysis of a well-known armed insurgency in Ethiopia's region of Bale, which took place from 1963 to 1970. The Bale insurgency was intersected with a broader situation of unrest and instability in the eastern parts of the Horn of Africa, from Eritrea in the north, to the Ogaden region, and all the way to Kenya with the so-called *shifita* war. Common for all these insurgencies was that they involved lowland pastoralist Muslims – making religion relevant when trying to understand the conflicts.

Previous interpretations of the insurgency have, from a Marxist perspective, emphasized class, taxation, and land alienation, and consequently underplayed religion and ethnicity. This book addresses this by incorporating religion as a variable, and seeks moreover 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 forwards 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.

The book is for the most part based on ethnographical research, and I have spent much time talking to former insurgents, military officers, government officials, and people witnessing the fighting. I completed a month in Ethiopia doing fieldwork related to this project during summer 2017, an

additional 2 weeks in Ethiopia in December 2017, as well as a short and final fieldwork in June 2018. Furthermore, I have gained access to valuable documents that have allowed me to triangulate between different sources. These documents include military communication, government records, and court files. All the chapters of the book are now finalized, and currently being reviewed by an internationally recognized university press. I anticipate to have it published sometime in 2019.

In addition to working on this book project, I also spent 3 weeks as a guest-researcher and lecturer at the University of Bergen in fall 2017. During my stay in Ethiopia in December 2017, I was moreover invited to give seminars to the graduate students in the Department of Anthropology, Addis Ababa University. In spring 2018 I was invited to give a lecture at the University of Tromsø, Norway.

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