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# Data Dea

# Christianity and Spirit Mediums: experiencing post-socialist religious freedom in Southern Ethiopia

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*Data Dea[1]*

## Abstract

This paper looks at aspects of post-socialist religious dynamics in Ethiopia. The rule of military socialism in Ethiopia came to an end in 1991. The new government declared a number of 'freedoms' including religious freedom. However, translating this declared freedom into real experience entails complex challenges. With ethnographic material drawn from southern Ethiopia[2], this paper examines the process of 'tapping' post-socialist religious freedom. The paper focuses especially on interaction between spirit mediums and two forms of Christianity, namely Ethiopian Orthodox and Evangelical Christianity. The ethnography reveals that different interpretations and appropriations of post-socialist religious freedom have led, paradoxically, to repression of certain forms of religiosity, in this case spirit mediumship in particular, but also certain ways of practicing Christianity. Examining these issues throws some light on the conditions of tolerance or intolerance between different traditions of religiosity.

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[2] I conducted field research in southern Ethiopia from January to September 2004 on issues discussed in this paper. This on-going research builds on my previous research in the area, notably the research for my doctoral dissertation at the University Sf Bergen (Dea 2003). Thus, this paper is based not only on the material collected during the recent fieldwork. I am grateful to Mathjis Pelkmans and Rozita Dimova for their critical but constructive comments on earlier versions of this paper.

**Introduction**

Among the revolutionary measures that were taken by the socialist state in Ethiopia (1974-1991) was a state policy to end the 1600 year-old ties between the Ethiopian state and the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church. Although the way socialism was practised in Ethiopia had its peculiarities, it had common traits with socialist practices elsewhere. A quintessential socialist practice in Ethiopia was to reject religion (at least some form of it) as superstition or as an institution of exploitation and domination, and an effort was made to replace it with Marxist ideology[3]. In 1991 the military socialist government was ousted from office and the socialist project was officially over. In the wake of post-socialist neo-liberalism of a sort, religion has come back with greater liveliness and is reasserting its authority with increasing significance in public sphere. In a somewhat exaggerated tone, a historian states:

> "They [religious institutions in post-socialist Ethiopia] are replacing the state by deploying large amounts of resources, man power and organizational skills (…). Whether to dream of a better world or to try to live less poorly in this one, many people in Ethiopia (as elsewhere when the state fails) have switched their allegiances from politics to religion." (Tadesse 2003: 14)

In parts of southern Ethiopia such as Wolaita, Dawro and Kaffa where the primary ethnographic data for this paper comes from, it is at present hard to think of any major aspect of village social life that is not affected by religion. All major life cycle rituals (weddings, funerals, births, housing) are organised in supposedly religious ways, though this might mean cultural as well. Some kinds of religious ritual is performed in most households everyday, e.g. prayer before or after meals, morning prayer and daily prayer. At the national level no other social or political event voluntarily brings together as many people and as frequently as religion does, e.g. celebration of epiphany where millions march to the ritual sites, and a variety of other religious gatherings.[4]

Notwithstanding this empirical situation, the academic attention accorded to this aspect of Ethiopian ethnography is staggering. This is particularly the case regarding the interaction (tension, negotiation, confrontation) between Christianity and 'traditional religion'; to say nothing of the interaction between different religious institutions more generally. However, this is not to deny that voluminous amount of literature has been produced on specific religious institutions, mostly by the institutions themselves, some by the state and some by social scientists. But what is missing in the previous work is an adequate relational analysis.

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[3] The Marxists too must have had unswerving faith in the original 'revelation' of dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels, and in the absolute competence of the communist party to interpret these oracles (Zaehner 2004 [1959]: 394).

[4] The phenomenal funeral of Pope John Paul II is a manifestation of the power and perhaps increasing importance of religion globally.

Reviewing the literature of the past 25 years on the relationship between Christianity and African religious traditions, Meyer (2004: 455) concludes that sophisticated treatments of African religious traditions in relation to Christianity are still relatively scarce.

Without claiming to offer the kind of sophisticated treatment Meyer has in mind, this paper examines the interaction between traditional religion and two forms of Christianity in contest in southern Ethiopia, namely, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Evangelical Christianity. The 'ethnographic present' is the post-socialist period (from 1991 onwards). As the following ethnography will demonstrate, different interpretations and appropriations of religious freedom in the post-socialist period leads, paradoxically, to 'repression' of certain forms of religiosity, in this case spirit mediumship, but also certain ways of practicing Christianity. Attempting to make sense of this particular aspect of Ethiopian ethnography, I shall also highlight some general questions pertaining to the anthropology of religion such as: Why do different practices of religiosity make sense to different people who are members of the same society? What informs people's thoughts and actions about their preferred mode of religiosity? How do contemporary forms of religious contestation affect processes in society at large? In the course of addressing these questions I also hope to contribute to the anthropological debate on the significance of religion in mediating 'community' (social harmony, integration) or engendering conflict (cf. Klass 1996). Subsequently what is suggested here is the need for an approach that examines social consequences of religious practices, without necessarily undermining aspects of religion that are profoundly meaningful to a specific community of believers.

**Spirit Mediums and Christianity: a relational definition**

Among the Omotic speakers of southwest Ethiopia, the generic term used for indigenous belief is *eqa* (broadly translated as worshipping or faith*).* The specialists of *eqa* are known by terms such as *sharetcho, kalicha, alama, tsossawa*. In this paper, I refer to them as spirit mediums. There exists a notable internal diversity between the practices of different spirit mediums as to whether they are just spirit mediums or if they also belong to one of the world religions, and whether they act only as healers, fortune tellers, revealers of hidden truth, ritual experts or combine two or more of these roles. A closer look at the institution of spirit mediumship in Ethiopia suggests that it exhibits some resemblance with institutions known elsewhere as shamanism (I. M. Lewis 1989 [1971]; Turner 1997 [1972]), divinity (Lienhardt, 1961) and *zar cult* (Boddy 1989). Since the terminological preference is often indicative of analytic emphasis, below I shall briefly state what I mean by *spirit mediums* (also represented

in this paper as leaders of traditional or indigenous religion). I first provide a relational definition of spirit mediums in the context of their confrontation, negotiation and compromise with two forms of Christianity, which dominate the religious landscape of southwest Ethiopia.

One relational dimension, which can be observed throughout Africa, is the 'negative incorporation' of spiritual entities in African religious traditions into the image of the Christian devil (Meyer 2004). This negative incorporation has led to a demonisation of the spirit mediums, particularly by Evangelical Christianity. This demonisation is affecting the 'dictionary definition' of local terms related to spirit mediumship. For instance, in the Omotic speaking region while the local term *sharetcho* means a holy person for his/her followers, for a Protestant Christian, *sharetcho* is a representation of the devil. Indeed the missionaries personified the *sharetcho* as demons (see Davis 1966). While the followers of the *sharetcho* use the term *goda* (god), the Protestants would prefer the term *talahiya* (literally devil) to address the *sharetcho*. For the Christians *talahiya* is the name of humanity's worst enemy, a malicious force out there to cause havoc in the world, whereas for the followers of traditional religion, *talahiya* is simply a spirit that can help if properly appeased but turns against one if neglected. Thus, the Protestants have given a new meaning to this local term *talahiya,* which did not traditionally mean something essentially wicked. As the Protestants' definition of the situation is becoming dominant, not only the meaning of the term has changed but the image of spirit mediums has been transformed from respected spiritual leaders to representations of demons. During the socialist time, this fitted conveniently with the socialist government's prosecution of spirit mediums as cultural enemies of the revolution and for fear of their ritual power (see Wolde 2002).

It is not just the definition and image of spirit mediums that has been negatively transformed. Also a range of other cultural practices, which fell outside the fold of Christian values as understood by a specific organisation, are disapproved. In short, those cultural practices that appear unacceptable when seen from the perspective of a certain understanding of Christianity are attributed to Satan worship and they are fused with the Christian critique of traditional religion. It is these critiques, working along a thoroughgoing modernity discourse of the state and the NGOs that have transformed the image of spirit medium.

However, when I use the term *sharetcho* translated as spirit mediums, I use it in the sense its practitioners use it, namely as leaders of indigenous religion. Even though the main source of their legitimacy is tradition and ancestral practice, there is no reason to assume that the practices of spirit mediumship never changes. Indeed we see an incredible amount of innovation and syncretism in its practice today, even drawing on Christianity and Islam. But

we also note that both Christianity and Islam have incorporated some aspects of traditional religion (see Aspen 2001; Braukämper 2002).

The diversity within what is referred to as Christianity is so great that we need a context-specific reference to what is meant by Christianity. Note that some Christian denominations refer to other Christian denominations as either fundamentally mistaken or even as worshipping Satan. One then wonders whether they all really belong to one category. For my purposes in this paper, it is necessary to maintain the following distinctions. At a generic level, I take it for granted that all subscribers of the diverse forms of Christianity, who consider themselves Christians, are Christians at least by self-ascription. Drawing on Barth's (1993) insight on 'tradition of knowledge', I perceive the diversity within Christianity as internal variation within a tradition of knowledge. At a lower level, an important distinction that I maintain throughout the paper is the distinction between Evangelical Christianity (at times referred to as Protestantism) and Orthodox Christianity (referring to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church).

Though the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Evangelical Churches differ on many fundamental issues, they are coming closer in their intolerance of indigenous religious practice of spirit mediumship. In fighting back, the success of the spirit mediums varies greatly between places. For instance, in Wolaita, where Evangelical Christianity has gained a clear upper hand, followers of the spirit mediums are swept away by the dominance of Christian values. Here the spirit mediums and persons who consult them are ill-treated even by the local agents of the state. Consequently, in 2004, spirit mediums are hardly visible to ordinary observers in Wolaita. In Kaffa, where Evangelical Christianity has not become as popular as it has in Wolaita, the *Ebede Goda* (supreme spirit medium/religious leader, who claims spiritual headship across the Omotic speaking region), remains the most powerful spiritual leader. In Kaffa there is no visible confrontation between the Orthodox Church and the *Ebede Goda*. He also maintains good relation with the state – he is officially invited as a religious leader by the state agents to their meetings where religious leaders need to be invited. In Kaffa and to an important extent in Dawro, people who become spirit mediums and those who consult the traditional spirits are not those who are marginalised in their own society. Indeed the spirit mediums are at the centre of their own society here and they are very powerful persons. Thus spirit mediumship in both Kaffa and Dawro cannot be defined as a 'peripheral cult' in the context of their own society. However, if considered in the historic context of national and global dominance, marginality becomes an all too obvious experience not just spirit mediums, but of a range of entire societies.

**History, Politics and Demography**

With respect to the interaction between Christianity and African religious traditions, two aspects of Ethiopian history need to be noted. First, Ethiopia has a long established national Church and Ethiopia has successfully averted colonial presence. Both aspects have implications of direct relevance on the issues discussed here. Though what has become the Ethiopian Orthodox Church originally came from outside and the Church used to look to Alexandria as its spiritual headquarters up until the mid 20th century (Kebede 1999), Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia has evolved in an uniquely Ethiopian way through the 1600 years of 'national practice'. Hence, the category 'Christianity' as opposed to 'African religious tradition' needs to be further qualified in the Ethiopian case. This history has deeply influenced the interaction between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the institution of spirit mediumship in Ethiopia. Through long years of coexistence with spirit mediumship, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has developed a mode of relating to spirit mediums that differs significantly from the way Evangelical Christianity looks at spirit mediumship (see also Aspen 2001).

Ethiopian's successful resistance against colonialism meant that Evangelical Christianity has been operating in a national context that is different from the colonial and post-colonial context of the rest of Africa except for Liberia. Among other things, the missionaries 'freedom of preaching' was limited to areas that were considered peripheral to Ethiopian Christianity. Indeed the Ethiopian Orthodox Church effectively used its political leverage to 'contain' the expansion of Evangelical Christianity to the traditional centre of the ancient Ethiopian kingdom, namely today's northern Ethiopia. This is not to say there are no Evangelical Christians in northern Ethiopia today, but their presence is still limited.

I have noted that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's officially sanctioned monopoly over the national religious space was annulled by the socialist state. But this did not lead to the creation of a level playing field for all religious institutions. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church still maintains its dominance of religious space at the national level (see table 1). But in various parts of the country other competitors such as Islam, Evangelical Christianity, and spirit mediums witness more or less success. This is not to suggest that the competition and even conflict between different religious institution is entirely new in Ethiopia. Indeed this goes way back in Ethiopian history. Islam has been around in Ethiopia (both in confrontation and compromise with other religions) since its first introduction in the 7th century. The most devastating confrontation between Islam and the Christian Ethiopian kingdom was the 16th century war led by Ahmad b. Ibrahim al-Gazi, known in short as Amhed Gragn (Trimingham

1965; Braukämper 2002). Especially after the so-called restoration of the Solomonic dynasty in the 13th century, Orthodox evangelists were also confronted and made compromises with leaders of what was referred to as the primal religion, for example in parts of southern Ethiopia (see Balisky 1997 for a review of this literature).

Since religion cannot be separated from concrete history, both material and spiritual, of real, historic people (Swi Werblowsky 2004 [1959]), it is not unexpected that the present-day religious landscape of southern Ethiopia and of Ethiopia at large bears the mark of long historical processes. The four major religious categories that are found in present-day Ethiopia (Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Evangelical Christianity and traditional religion/spirit mediumship) have historical origins which still influence their present practices, including their ideal of religiosity and their structural position vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis the state.

Orthodox Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia in the 4th century and until 1974 it was the state religion. Thus having been there for about 1600 years, Orthodox Christianity is deeply engraved in national cultural and political practices (see Kebede 1999; Aspen 2001). But this holds more true in the Semitic speaking northern part of the country. Regarding other parts of the country, records are controversial at best. It is debatable even, when Christianity came to southern Ethiopia. Balisky's (1997) review of the literature with respect to southern Ethiopia shows that as early as the 13th century there were confrontations, negotiations and compromises between the primal religion and the evangelists of the Orthodox Church. Other scholars (Donham 1986; Lange 1982; Pankhurst 1997) also assert that the southern polities were connected to the Ethiopian Christian Empire before they were cut off by the combined effects of the 16th century Oromo expansion and the religious war between the Christian Empire and the Islamic force led by Amhed Gragn. Such recounts of history were invoked by the ideologues of imperial expansion of late 19th century to justify the forced incorporation of the southern polities into the Amhara dominated Christian empire. And it was as an ideological companion of this 'reunification' that Orthodox Christianity as known today reached most parts of southern Ethiopia in the late 19th century. It was one of what Donham (1986) identifies as the three principal components of Abyssinianisation of southern Ethiopia[5]: "The expansion of Orthodox Christianity was the last aspect of the tripartite process of Abyssinianisation, and like the ability to speak Amharic; it was contradictory in class character: that is, it at once legitimised Abyssinian society and its traditional inequalities and undermined the superexploitation that took place in the peripheries." (Donham 1986: 11).

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[5] The other two being the spread of the *rist* system of land tenure and the adoption of the Amharic language.

For most people in southern Ethiopia, the Orthodox Church's close association with and ideological support of the feudal empire that committed one of the worst human atrocities is not easy to forget, especially when nothing is done on the side of the Church to redress this basic issue of morality. A related question is being raised at the national level as well. While some praise the Ethiopian Orthodox Church for playing a significant role as defender, custodian and transmitter of all that is dignified in Ethiopian history, there are others who highlight the darker side of how this faith has been practised in this country. In a recent internet-based debate, Mitiku Addisu aptly sums up the main points raised at the national level:

> "The church [Ethiopian Orthodox Church] blessed and legitimized the powerful and the corrupt, did not advance mass literacy in matters of faith and cognition, often questioned the national identity of those outside its fold, and frequently harassed the new generation that sought to quench its spiritual thirst in other ways than the church could provide, recognize or endorse." (Addisu 2004)[6]

In southern Ethiopia considerations such as these provide a substantial part of the explanation for the success of Evangelical Christianity, which could be characterised as 'Ethiopia's left'. "They [Evangelical Churches] fought for ethnic equality, social justice, land reform, and freedom in most cases favouring the poor." (Tadesse 2003: 7) Whatever its failings maybe viewed from a global perspective, Evangelical Christianity has offered the peoples of southern Ethiopia an alternative route to meaning, identity and even resistance to power in one of the darkest times of their history. Consequently, in parts of the region which concern this paper, it is Evangelical Christianity which is the most powerful religious institution at present (see table 1).

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[6] In an attempt to relativise this, Kebede would recall "Churches in Europe have been accused of greater crimes, as witnessed by the various schisms which racked Western Christianity." (Kebede 1999: 69)

Table 1. Religious subscription at the national level and at the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR).

|  | **National** | **SNNPR** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Total population | 53,477,265 | 10, 371,192 |
| Traditional | 4.7 % | 15.4% |
| Orthodox | 49% | 27.6% |
| Muslim | 33% | 16.7% |
| Protestant | 10% | 34.8% |
| Others | 3% | 5.4% |
| Not stated | 1% | 0.1% |

Based on 1994 census, Central Statistical Authority (CSA), 1998.

Though this statistics does give some overview of the broader picture, it is a too crude representation of a much more complex reality. At present, actors in the religious space are extraordinarily heterogeneous. We do not have a complete list of how many religious institutions are operating in Ethiopia at present. A partial list found in the Federal Ministry of Justice, where religious institutions *can* register for official recognition, shows that between the years 1992 to 2004, the Federal Bureau registered 277 religious institutions, which sought official status. This is a very incomplete list because 1) registration with the Federal Bureau is required only if a religious institution operates in more than one regional state; if it operates only in one region it has to register with the regional state and such records are not sent to the Federal Ministry. 2) I was informed by the persons in charge at the Federal Bureau that both at federal and regional levels, religious institutions register only if they want to, which means some might be operating without registering. Of the 277 that were registered with the Federal Ministry, in at least 89 cases the word 'church' appears somewhere in their name, which means they are autonomous churches at the national level. Though not unambiguous, words such as 'assembly', 'ministry', 'army' may also indicate that such institutions are autonomous in the country. Generally, there is a great variety of religious institutions and their number seems to increase by day. Most of them have a sizable followership, thus producing multitudes of religious communities in the country.

As compared to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and Islam[7], Evangelical Christianity is a relative newcomer to the religious landscape of Ethiopia. Even though the encounter between Ethiopia and western missionaries goes back at least 500 years (Bakke 1998), it was only in the early 20th century that it was possible to establish a national Evangelical Church in Ethiopia. This was not because the missionaries did not wish to establish a separate congregation but because refraining from establishing a non-orthodox congregation was a condition of being permitted to operate in the country. Thus, until the time of Haile Sellasie, the stated policy of most, if not all missionaries working in Ethiopia was to refrain from establishing new, that is non-Orthodox congregations (Farger 1996; see also the volume edited by Haile, Lande & Rubenson 1998).

In the places which concern this paper, the strongest Protestant Church is Kalehiwet. Kalehiwet grew out of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), which was introduced to Ethiopia in 1927 by the missionary physician, Dr. Thomas Lambe (Balisky 1997). SIM was an interdenominational faith mission founded in Toronto (Canada) in 1897. Though SIM started as an anti-modernist branch of Christianity in the North American context (as a doctrine to protect religion from modernist claims of science), it was its modern services such as education, medicine and other manifestations of modernity that played a key role for its entry into southern Ethiopia (Donham 1999). All along, conversion to Protestantism was associated with practising modernity which almost invariably meant rejection of many aspects of tradition/local culture. As Donham puts it:

> "Becoming a [Protestant] Christian, for those fundamentalists [those missionaries who introduced Sudan Interior Mission to southern Ethiopia], did not depend upon a mere rite like baptism; rather, conversion required a wholesale separation from the world and a basic behavioural change in the converts' moral lives (…). In southern Ethiopia, an emphasis on so-called separation led to a radical rejection of tradition (…)." (Donham 1999: 95-96)

An aspect of such radical rejection of tradition is the labelling of traditional religion as devil worship and therefore evil. But we cannot assume that every Evangelical Christian believed to the same extent in the evilness of traditional spirits and their mediums. The missionaries, the local church leaders and ordinary believers seem to have different reasons for rejecting the indigenous religion. The missionaries' conceptualisation of indigenous religion as devil worship was nothing unique to southern Ethiopia, but it was a specific manifestation of Western Christianity that had its underpinning in colonial arrogance. As the Comaroff's

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[7] According to the 1994 census (Central Statistical Authority 1998) Islam also commands very high followership in regions like Somalia and Afar where Muslims constitute over 95% of the population. It constitutes less than 20% of the population in regions such as Amhara and the south.

(1991) noted, the nature of Christianity in a place is heavily influenced by the local context. Aspects of that local context of relevance are a) a need on parts of the local population of Southern Ethiopia to find a new basis of identity that would give people a sense of dignity in the face of a dehumanising feudal conquest and an imposition of the religion of the new politically dominant group, and b) some excesses and failures of indigenous religious leaders who were in many regards like any other religious leaders. In some places people from the lower status groups converted to Protestantism, rejecting belief in local *ayana* (spirit) as an aspect of a culture which situates them in materially and symbolically disadvantaged positions in their own society (Davis 1966).

I mentioned earlier that Evangelical Christianity is popular in Wolaita and the spirit mediumship of *Ebede Goda* is the most popular institution in most of Kaffa. Between the Protestant domination of Wolaita and that of *Ebede Goda* in Kaffa is located the former kingdom of Dawro, where (up until 2003) none of the religious institutions command followership of an overwhelming majority. In Dawro the respective religious institutions have strong holds in different localities. My own survey undertaken in 2000 in one such a locality shows that out of the 116 households in Wachi village, in highland Dawro, 37% of household heads subscribed to traditional religion, 35% subscribed to Orthodox Christianity and 28% to Evangelical Christianity. But when I went back in the year 2004, what I saw was surprising, if not shocking (see table 2).

Table 2. Local trends in religious belonging in Wachio Village, Dawro, SNNPR.

| Year | Religious Category | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Traditional | Orthodox | Protestant | Others |
| 2000 (N=116) | 37% | 35% | 28% | - |
| 2004 (N=158) | 1% | 46% | 47% | 6% |

Source: Data Dea, Survey 2000 and 2004.

Though in some respects the changes in this village seem to be an extreme case, the pattern is in accord with the general trend of rapidly spreading Protestantism and intensified efforts of the Orthodox Church to counter the Protestant challenge. They have both managed in this village to 'save the souls' of followers of traditional religion. I will return to examine the processes involved and also look at the broader implications of such a trend.

Despite such dramatic changes, in the year 2004 seven practicing spirit mediums (distributed in five villages) lived in Gozo Bamushi Kebele administration (KA)[8] in highland Dawro. In this KA there also are six former spirit mediums who had given up being spirit mediums during the last ten years. Of the total of 13[9] spirit mediums (including those who stopped recently) in Gozo Bamushi KA, five are from the highest status group of Malla, five are from a status group of ex-slaves, one is from a low status groups of tanners, one is from the lowest status group named Manja and one from the formerly highest but now declining socio-political group named Amhara/Naftegna. A few of them are economically poor, but most are better off by local standard.

In August 2004 in Mareka Gena district of Dawro, an NGO (Action Aid Ethiopia) operating in the area in collaboration with the district administration, organised a workshop trying to reach what the organisers called witchcraft (which is referred to as spirit mediums in this paper). The invitees came mainly from ten KAs where the NGO operates. In this workshop, 73 persons appeared, declaring themselves to be practising *sharetcho* (spirit mediums) in the year 2004 in those KAs. The youngest was 23 years old and the most senior was estimated to be over 100 years old. Nine of them were women. In this meeting the spirit mediums were accused of engaging in 'harmful cultural practices' such as polygamy and discriminating against people from lower status groups, whereas the spirit mediums complained against their own discrimination by the government, the churches and by village social institutions which are increasingly dominated by newer practices of Christianity.

In the Gozo Bamushi KA, there are two Kalehiwet churches including the headquarters of Dawro Konta Kalehiwet Church. The popular Waka St. Mariam (Virgin Mary) Orthodox Church is located just at the edge of this KA, where it boarders on Waka town. At the other end of this KA a newly established (a year or so earlier) Catholic Church is located. This church has already attracted a good number of converts. As some of the converts I interviewed indicated, its attractions include education help for school-age children, less rigid ritual requirements that leave sufficient space for cultural ways of life (e.g. no total ban on alcohol, no rigid fasting rules). It would be a mistake, however, to reduce conversion to an easy decision on the side of the converts. Conversion involves critical agency on the side of the converts. That is, they make a conscious decision to change their religion after carefully weighing what they gain and lose in terms of questions that really matter to them, whether these are about life in this or in the other world.

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[8] A Kebele administration (KA) is a lower level administrative unit of the government structure, which can comprise anywhere between 200 to 1000 households or even more. Gozo Bamush is constituted of about 550 households. The average household size is five persons.

[9] Of these 13 spirit mediums, three are women and ten are men.

**Religiosity and Everyday Social Interaction in Highland Dawro**

Anyone who understands local 'customs' here, would guess the religion of a person from common everyday rituals such as greetings, or what a persons does or says during meals. Believers are expected to and mostly they do manifest their religiosity though the established norms of their faith. Particularly interesting are interfaith encounters in this regard.

One morning a man named Okanto (a Protestant Christian in his late 40s) happened to be in the house of his neighbour Mekuria (a spirit medium). While we were chatting it was time for morning coffee/breakfast to be served. According to the established codes of Mekuria's spirit, at every meal time before anyone starts eating, a brief ritual should be performed offering a symbolic portion of food or coffee to the spirits. For the Protestants, who consider this as devil worship, wherever such ritual is performed, the food becomes *tuna* (polluted; ritually unclean). In such contexts a common Protestant response in highland Dawro is that if the person is a 'fanatic Protestant' s/he would leave the house altogether, if moderate s/he would sit on the veranda and eat a portion of the food set aside before the spirit ritual was performed. On this particular occasion at Mekuria's house it was different. The host (Mekuria) invited his Protestant neighbour to praise the lord for the food (adjusting even his language use to the Protestant vocabulary). Happy Okanto praised the lord and Mekuria's own ritual was bypassed on that occasion. One outcome was that neighbourhood sociality went undisrupted.

Later on I enquired whether this was common and whether this was acceptable to Mekuria's spirit. Mekuria replied that it was perfectly acceptable to his spirit because Okanto praised the sky God and all the spirits themselves praise the sky God since they are below, and not above Him. While most spirit mediums would not have a problem with Mekuria's positioning of the spirit vis-à-vis the sky God, they may not subscribe to Mekuria's strategy of letting a Protestant prayer replace his own ritual. Why Mekuria did this becomes clearer when we see (section below) his highly weakened position at the time and the kind of conflicts he was trying to manage. But a general point to be noted is that Mekuria's actions were part of people's strategy to keep socialising across religious boundaries. They do this by reconnecting, what has been separated, to use Barth's (Barth 2000) terms. In this act of reconnecting some spirit mediums go to the extent of rejecting the idea that God and Devil are enemies. It is through these strategies that under contemporary circumstances the spirit mediums have remained resilient in the face of the campaign against them by the powerful establishments. The spirit mediums have combined 'weapons of the weak' style resistance

(Scott 1985) with a more pro-active strategy of forming new alliances and mobilising kinship networks.

But religious change and consequent changes in organisation of life cycle rituals introduced by Christianity have profound implications for kinship itself. My example here, which comes from a funeral ritual, is also a case for socially reconnecting what has been religiously separated. According to traditions common throughout the Omotic speaking southwest, funerals are an occasion where the social significance of kinship is elaborately displayed. In both Wolaita and Dawro, a focal point of performance on the funeral day is the *alisua/tachia* line. This is a row of close kin (both consanguinal and affinal) of the bereaved family. Traditionally, which is the same for Orthodox Christians as well, those who join *alisua* stand alongside the host family, facing those who come to pay their respect. That is, those in the *alisua* line receive condolences as part of the bereaved family. The Protestants introduced, as part of their new way of organising the funeral ritual, the idea that in *alisua* Protestants should sit and not stand. This created some difficulty in cases where a kinship group comprised people who subscribe to different religions. As the followers of different religions could not agree on whether to sit or to stand in the *alisua,* among members of some clans the Protestant converts refused to take part in non-Protestant *alisua* or they were not allowed to join such a *alisua*. But this could not continue for too long, since cases became more than being exception as religious conversion deepened. The compromise worked out was that in non-Protestant *alisua* lines some could stand and others could sit. Thus here too, people had to find a strategy of socially reconnecting what was religiously separated. As informants recall, as recently as the 1960s, it was extremely awkward to see an *alisua* where some people were sitting and others standing (unless the ones sitting were elderly or sick). But now this has become 'normal'. These responses could also be looked at as important aspects of social change in general.

**Experiences of Religious Integration and Exclusion**

The following is a concrete account, involving two generations of men who confronted social change at two different points in local and national history. Thus this specific case is also about the concrete manifestations of larger processes and events. This is the case of Mekuria. When I first met him in 1999, Mekuria was still a highly respected and economically better off spirit medium in Wachi village, highland Dawro.

Mekuria was possessed by his father's spirits towards the end of the socialist period in the late 1980s. He tells his story:

> My father had two wives. My mother was the younger of the two and I was her third son. In biological birth order there were four brothers of mine who were older than me, all alive. Hence, being one of the junior sons to my father I did not expect to inherit the spirit. But I was the closest to my father in the spirit house assisting him; and my father used to like me most. However, I had no idea, nor a wish to inherit the *ayana* (spirit). I wanted to continue with my life as trader who could move freely between places. When the spirit came to me I first refused its will and I was sick for seven years. During four of these years, I was physically immobilised by the anger of the spirit so that I could not even walk. It was only after the spirit manifested itself clearly and I consented to its will that my health and wealth also slowly recovered.

Becoming a spirit medium meant getting used to new ways of living his life; his movements were restricted; all his activities were under the 'surveillance' of the spirit. Generally the spirit medium's movement and physical contact with other people is very limited in Dawro. This is meant to protect him/her from being polluted by unguarded contact with ritually unclean public spaces. But, such restrictions of movement also mean that the spirit medium is thought of as a permanent 'guardian' of the village and also it may be part of mystifying the spirit medium as a ritual expert.

Traditionally, a spirit medium was exempted from labour obligations of the village social institutions. There were some justifications for this exemption. Attending a house where a death or a birth has happened is considered to be polluting for a spirit medium because s/he may meet people who did not observe the rules of being ritually clean. Thus, s/he was relieved from all physical work in order to avoid the likelihood of getting polluted. There were also other conventions that sanctify the spirit medium as a person to be protected from all 'sources of unseemliness'. These practices, which protect a spirit medium from a possible pollution include: s/he should not commonly shake hands with anyone; s/he should not eat food cooked in houses other than his/her own or other spirit mediums; any blood (including menstrual and birth) should not touch his/her house; anything touched by a *Manja* (lowest status group in the Dawro hierarchy) should not come to the land or house of a spirit medium; s/he should not mix with ordinary people at market places.

The extent of seclusion of the spirit medium as sacred person depends, among other things, on the type of spirit s/he hosts. Accordingly, some spirit mediums interact with people relatively freely while others were almost totally secluded in terms of physical contact such as shaking hands or sharing seats. My case study spirit medium Mekuria could be placed towards the secluded end of the continuum. He hosts twelve spirits: Awayonto, Mairaminto (*marian negi, marian jiji*), Giragn, Adal Moti,  Bodosonto, Ashelonto, Wosen Galla, Shewa

Anbessu, Aba Maga (Tequar Aba Megal), Ofa, Saiid and Adbaria. Though hosting more than one spirit is not uncommon in the wider African context (see Sharp 1999), Mekuria's combination of hosting spirits which may fall into different 'traditions of knowledge' (Dawro, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Cushitic tradition) invites some important questions. By looking at just the names of the spirits he hosts and the symbols associated with each, we notice some social and religious connections to other traditions outside Dawro. Mekuria's main ritual hut is called *mesgidiya,* a term derivative of Amharic *mesgid* (mosque) – indicating Islamic roots; the second hut is for Gabrelanta, derivative of the Amharic St. Gabriel, indicating inspiration from Orthodox Christianity; the third hut is for Adal Moti, an Oromo traditional spirit, which probably has some connection to Afar in Northeast. I encountered a female spirit medium in Harar, eastern Ethiopia, who hosted Adal Moti. Aba Maga, which is the name of another of Mekuria's spirits, is a historical name of the founding Monarch of the Muslim Oromo kingdom of Jimma (H. Lewis 2001 [1965]). Saiid and Gragn are other Muslim characters that appear as names of spirits that Mekuria hosts. Gragn is the popular name of a 16th century Muslim warrior who challenged the Christian empire. Awayonto, Ashelonto and Bodosonto are very popular Dawro spirits.

Each of the spirits Mekuria hosts has its own coffee pot (*jebena*), which is used to serve coffee during the specific ritual for that spirit. A coffee pot is among the basic symbols that appear almost every day in every household and the coffee ceremony is the most basic of rituals in Dawro sociality and in Ethiopia at large.

Other symbols in Mekuria's ritual house which also appear in other social contexts in Dawro are: drums, which the Orthodox church also uses; leaves from the *gara* tree, also used in all purification rituals and as medicine for stomach ache; a spear (a general symbol of masculinity and warriorhood); and leaves from the bamboo tree, associated in highland Dawro with greenness, resilience, reproduction, fertility.

Mekuria's father was first a warrior, part of Emperor Menelik II's conquering imperial army. He came to Dawro as part of that ill-famed group of people who settled in the newly incorporated regions. In that account he was politically an Amhara. But genealogically Mekuria's father was a Shewan Oromo; not so surprising since Shewa Oromo constituted a significant portion of Menelik's soldiers and later Naftegna (literally 'gun-carrier'; settler members of the ruling class established in southern Ethiopia in the wake of Menelik's conquest) in the newly incorporated areas of the south. But Mekuria's father did not live his life only as a Naftegna settler in Dawro. He became a spirit medium who hosted some Dawro, some Amhara and some Oromo spirits, thus undercutting ethnic and political boundaries. This

seems to have given him an edge in the enterprise of spirit mediumship. Thus, at the dawn of the revolution in 1974 he was one of the richest and most powerful men in Dawro[10].

Mekuria's father was a member of the Orthodox Church and thus was well positioned in the then socio-political order. But why did he choose to be spirit medium in Dawro? He was definitely not rebelling in the conventional sense. Whatever his real reasons may have been, its social consequence was that by being a spirit medium and claiming to be possessed by some Dawro spirits he was integrated into the local community and exercised a different kind of power. As a spirit medium he was not only integrated into the local society but also participated in the production and reproduction as well as the transformation of the ritual life and the symbolic world. Mekuria followed his father's tradition and that helped him up until very recently. But then things changed.

Like many other spirit mediums, including his own father, Mekuria used to be a member of the Orthodox Church until he was expelled (or perhaps temporarily suspended) from church membership in 2004. This occurred during the resurgence of a dispute in this locality between the Orthodox Church and the spirit mediums that had flared a couple of years earlier. In 1999/2000, all the spirit medium members of the Waka Mariam Orthodox Church were given an ultimatum by the Church leaders to choose between being Christians or being spirit mediums, for they could no longer continue being both at the same time. The Church took this measure following a letter it claimed to have received from the head office in Addis Ababa to that effect. But one of my lay informants (who is a sympathiser of the spirit mediums) suspects that the Church took this measure not because anybody higher in the Church bureaucracy said so but because the Church was challenged locally by the Protestants, both theologically (for having members who also worship Satan) and sociologically (by increased conversion to Protestantism). It was a hard choice for the spirit mediums. And they fought back collectively by arguing that they had been members of the Church, that they had been paying annual membership fees throughout their lives and that it had been a tradition since their parents' time to practise their *eqa* (in this context represented as a cultural practice not contradictory to modern religion) while still being members of the Church. This was a rare occasion in which I saw the spirit medium members of the Orthodox Church actually form a group for a specific task. They apparently succeeded then. In 2000 the Orthodox Church had

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[10] He was later accused of being an exploiter and consequently he went through the public humiliation of such persons at the hands of the socialist zealots. As widely reported now, those socialist cadres forced the spirit mediums to eat and drink things ritually forbidden to them, and forced them to interact with people in the way that was considered ritually polluting. Whatever the cause might be, Mekuria's father died shortly after all this happened to him.

to 'back off' from the idea of expelling the spirit mediums from church membership partly because the spirit mediums working together and mobilising all their networks constituted a social force that the Church could not sideline.

However, in 2004, the spirit mediums were expelled from Ethiopian Orthodox Church membership once again. Mekuria laments:

> The Orthodox Church has become just like the *pentes* [a derogatory term for Protestants]. They have started to curse those people who drink alcohol, smoke tobacco, ride on horses and those who consult the spirit mediums. My father was a *sharetcho* like my self. But he was a respected member of the Orthodox Church and was buried with dignity in the Church's cemetery. Now these people are saying to me that I will not be buried in the cemetery. God knows if my body will be thrown away anywhere like that of animals [meaning burial on his own land, which he thinks is not a sacred burial site]. I cannot give up this spirit, which has been the practice of my *lapuna* [seven generations]. The spirit will not leave me anyway. When my father tried to abandon it because of the pressure from the cadres, the spirit punished him by death.
>
> This priest [referring to a priest at Waka St. Mary's Church whose name is intentionally left out here] who grew up with me here is making a lot of trouble for me. I have tried to approach him secretly. He seemed to be interested to negotiate. He came to my house, as my guest but then he turned against me once again. He even often stands on the road junction up here and checks on the people who come to visit me. He then warns them that they will be expelled from the Church if they continue consulting the *sharetcho*. Now people are afraid of him and some of them stopped consulting me and others consult me in the night. He makes a lot of curses against these people when he preaches in the Church and people are afraid of such curses. Some of the *sharetcho* have given up and went to them. But I cannot do that. I will not leave my father's spirit and it will not leave me either. (June 2004)

For a while, being expelled from the Orthodox Church did not mean that Mekuria was totally excluded from the village community. He was still a member of the village *idirea* (housing and burial association), which was a very important village social security institution. Unfortunately, the impact of the contestation within the world religion followed Mekuria's life via the *idirea*. In July 2004, Mekuria received a message from the village *idirea* to the effect that he either takes part in all the duties of the association like any ordinary member (in practice this means he should abandon all the ritual observances of a *sharetcho*) or he is no longer considered a member of the village *idirea*. It needs to be noted that life in the village without membership to *idirea* is almost unthinkable for any responsible head of a household. By taking this position the *idirea* was making it impossible for Mekuria to continue as a spirit medium. If ultimately expelled from the *idirea,* Mekuria's exclusion from his own society would be more or less complete. This would have serious consequences for interaction even with members of his own lineage and in-laws because the latter were also

pressured by the respective religious institutions to abide by the 'decision of society' to ex-communicate the spirit mediums. I know cases of spirit mediums who declared, following such threats of ex-communication, that they gave up being spirit mediums and subsequently joined one of the Christian sects. In such cases conversion was not strictly voluntary.

Mekuria still hopes that the Orthodox Church will reconsider its position and if it does, he wants to rejoin the Church. There are many spirit mediums who have never been members of any of the world religions. But even many of the spirit mediums who had been members of the Orthodox Church and were expelled from it along with Mekuria did not take the course of action Mekuria took. Some decided to abandon the Church which had abandoned them. Alanche, aged approximately 65, was one of the most outspoken spirit mediums I talked to. The following is his reaction to my question on how he was dealing with being expelled from the Church:

> If the Orthodox Church wants to be like the *pentes* [Protestants] and does not want me to practice my *lapuna* [seven generations] tradition, I have no reason to beg them. I have my own god, I have my own *woga mayua* [ritual insignia], I have my own *mitsa* [ritual house] where I can worship my god and I have enough people who believe in my *ayana* [spirit]. Why should I try to go back to the Orthodox Church? (interviewed in May 2004, in his 'junior house' in Waka town, Dawro)[11]

This is not the predicament of these few men only. It is a specific manifestation of a general phenomenon that is unfolding, in various forms, elsewhere in the country. Rather than being an isolated phenomenon of disparate villages, it is underpinned by flows of ideologies, resources and influences connecting the local, the national and the global sphere of interaction. These social conflicts manifest themselves differently in different places. In the Gamo highlands, for instance, "these various churches compete to occupy hilltops and groves sacred to the traditional religion, as proof and symbol of their own superiority. What from the outside appears to be an ethnically defined unit of a federal state is in fact a fighting ground of rich Christian sects, all seeking to impose their will over Gamo." (Wolde 2003: 454-455)

It is striking in this regard that while religions preach that they connect believers across ethnic and national boundaries, they paradoxically divide neighbours and relatives. By doing so, religion shapes in fundamental ways both the connections and discontinuities between generations, places and time. As my ethnography and many other previous studies (i.e. Donham 1999; Schlee 2003; Wolde 2003; Feyissa 2003) indicate, issues of power, identity, meaning and material resources are deeply and at times intractably involved in religion. It

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[11] His senior (main) ritual house is located in a village far away from the main road.

then follows that we need to shift our emphasis from looking at religion in the context of other issues to looking at religion itself as context for struggle, contest and negotiation over important issues.

**Religion as Context**

In a recent paper, Lambek (2000) characterises anthropology of religion as

> "(…) an investigation of the historically situated imagination and realisation of meaningful ends, practical means, authoritative voice, dignified and virtuous agency, and reasoned as well as passionate submission (albeit in the midst of, and often by means of, exclusion, oppression, suppression, repression, discipline, denigration, hypocracy, rationalization etc) (...)." (Lambek 2000: 318)

This highlights both the paradoxes in practices of religion and the dilemmas for an anthropology of religion. But paradoxes are common in many fields of human social life.

It may be obvious that religion is a regime of power (ibid.), that is, a context for competition over power or any other valued resource. Following Foucault (1980) and Marxist insights in general, wherever there is power we must expect some form of resistance to it. With respect to religion, power and reactions to it may take place within a certain religion, between various religious institutions and between religions and secular institutions such as the state. A good example of the first kind is provided by Schlee (2003) who looks at the consequences of competition for forms of power within a religious institution. Two implications of the point Schlee makes are of relevance for my discussion here. The first is his conclusion that competition for forms of power leads to rapid rigidification of belief and ritual practices. And second, non-compliance with these rigidified ritual rules leads to exclusion from power. It can be observed further that too rigid ritual requirements and exclusion from power within a religious institution may lead to conversion. In sociological statistics, conversion may simply be represented as loss of members of one religious institution and gain of the same for other religious institutions. This could be a cause of tension, mutual labelling and even a potential cause of conflict between religious institutions.

Such tension is one of the salient features of the relationship between Evangelical Churches and the Orthodox Church in Ethiopia. The Orthodox Church laments the missionaries' idea of trying to convert the converted (see Haile, Lande & Rubenson 1998). At a further level of complication, conversion is not just about what happens within or between the religious institutions. For example, as Donham (1990, 1999) has well documented, to convert to Evangelical Christianity in southern Ethiopia was at least partly a political reaction against the repressive state and against the religion of the politically dominant group in the country. That

socio-political context has broadly changed, first by the socialist revolution and further by the religious freedom declared by the post-socialist state. In the southern Ethiopian case, both of these changes have led to more intensified competition between the different religious institutions. But what does this mean to an ordinary believer and his/her various concerns? To what extent does the issue of power explain the actions of ordinary believers?

I have mentioned that millions of people submit to religious authority apparently wilfully, without any eminent threat of physical force. This could be looked at from the perspective of Weberian (Weber 1968) ideal types of power, even though his ideal types refer first and foremost to political power. Consider, for example, his ideal type of legitimate exercise of authority, which he calls legitimate domination. According to Weber, domination may be based on the most diverse motives of compliance all the way from simple habit to the most purely rational calculation of advantages. Hence every genuine form of domination implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, *interest* (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience. This is related to Weber's conceptualisation of the connection between power and meaning as well as his generally positive view of power as an organisational capacity. We can assume that for the believers, religion is profoundly meaningful, though the nature of that meaning and how it is effected may vary between places and institutions. But for a religious institution to survive in today's religious 'free market' preaching 'meaning' is not sufficient; this has to be combined with more aggressively efficient bureaucratic organisation. This is done in ways significantly different from the type of social work necessary to exercise religious authority under conditions of religious monopoly. I argue that the outcome of religious competition in southern Ethiopia under contemporary conditions depends at least as much on the respective religious institutions' bureaucratic efficiency[12] as it does on their meaningfulness. This goes some way in explaining the differential success between the two forms of Christianity which draw on national and global resources and the spirit mediums that depend entirely on their own local resources.

In this regard spirit mediumship is simultaneously both empowering and disempowering. Spirit mediums like Mekuria discussed above, who stand excluded from their own society, are disempowered by the better connected and more resourceful religious establishments. However, in refusing to abandon their way of believing even in the face of such exclusion, the likes of Mekuria are empowered. They draw on a local tradition of invoking supernatural

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[12] By 'bureaucratic efficiency' I refer to a complex combination of skills to set up and run a religious institution with formalised hierarchic organisation, the ability to form networks that stretch across the 'global space' and at last combining 'soul saving' with development activities.

power, submitting to its will and appropriating it in order to counter other supernatural and worldly powers. In this regard, as Lambek (2000) noted, spirit mediumship is an example of the intricate combination of passion and action, of both submission and resistance, of creativity and pro-activity. By deploying such a combination of action, many spirit mediums in southwest Ethiopia are still well and sound, despite a sustained campaign against them by powerful world religions, the state and even by non-governmental organisations.

But why do these powerful establishments campaign so fiercely against these local institutions? Could it be that the very fact that the spirit medium's exercise of a non-centralised form of religiosity firmly rooted in the local culture is found to be a threat to the desires of these hegemony orientated establishments? A state agent once readily admitted that in places like Dawro, the spirit mediums are detrimental to the state's practice of law (Dea 2000). That is, the state rejects the practice of spirit mediumship because they engender resistance to the state' hegemony. We should then ask: does a similar desire of hegemony play a role in the Christian rejection of spirit mediumship? In an interesting study of spirit mediums in the Christian Shewa, central Ethiopia, Aspen (2001) observed:

> "On several occasions when I have observed practices and expressions that I have believed would be incompatible with a Christian faith, I have discretely enquired if the participants actually adhered to Christianity (one such instance I recall, was a *zar hadrai* where prayers were full of references to Allah and Mohammed and other core symbols of Islam), (…) and without exception, the reply was a mildly surprised 'why? Of course we are all Christians'." (Aspen 2001: 235)

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, whose local version in Dawro is persecuting spirit mediums, is in perfect harmony with spirit mediums in Christian Shewa. Aspen's explanation for this is that "(…) all the innovations and diversions from Orthodox *great tradition* (here Christianity) are not a threat to its *hegemonic status* but a confirmation of it." (ibid; emphasis added by author). Getting clues from here we can consider two explanatory factors for the situation observed in southern Ethiopia. The first is the desire for hegemony and the second is the notion of incompatibility. For Aspen the local Christian Amhara practices related to spirit mediums appeared incompatible to his prior understanding of practising Christianity. In his case this led to enquiry. In the southern Ethiopian case too, it was a conception of incompatibility that led to institutionalised rejection of spirit mediumship. It is this notion of incompatibility that has become the cause for the expulsion of persons like Mekuria from membership in the Orthodox Church. Possession by traditional spirits (and many other aspects of traditional religion) constitutes a recurrent ground to criticise many believers in southern Ethiopia. Some of the evangelical missionaries have a stated policy of drawing on

'primal religion'. In practice, however, at least in the southern Ethiopian case, this did not make any significant difference in terms of accepting traditional religion as legitimate practice.


**Conclusion**


The commitment religion engenders, and its impact on people's lives, as shown in the proceeding analysis, reconfirms that religion constitutes an extraordinarily meaningful act. However, this might mean a range of different things for different people. But what seems to be common is that religious ideologies do what ideologies generally do: they give meaning to the dynamics of existence but also form an orienting aspect of the way human beings move in their worlds (cf. Kapferer (1997)). Many people employ them to make sense of difficult situations and experiences. In the southern Ethiopian case, it can be noted that before historical circumstances brought the aggressively competing forms of world religions, the spirit mediums, then leaders of indigenous religious order, practiced their belief as a legitimate religion and they had a respected official status. But at present, spirit mediums have to compete for the same cultural space sought by the new ideologies. One outcome of this contest is demonisation of spirit mediumship.

Like other 'modernist establishments' such as the state and NGOs, both Evangelical Churches and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church reject the spirit mediums on the bases of their own definition of spiritual and social practice. Like most human institutions, spirit mediumship has its own undesirable social consequences including unequal material outcomes for different people and abuse of spiritual power by some, not all, spirit mediums. While this is by no means to be defended, it is not an immorality committed only by the spirit mediums; one would find aspects of it in all religious institutions. Therefore, the reasons why the spirit mediums are so demonised and excluded is not merely because they are guilty of all the immoralities they are accused of but basically because they refuse to evacuate the cultural space desired by these other ideologies. We then conclude that religion here, as is the case in many other places in the world, is not just a private matter of spirituality, but also a political act mediating historically constituted contests for power and resistances involved therein.

In the post-socialist era, Ethiopia is witnessing not only an 'explosion of religion'. This is also the time in which ethnicity as a basis of collective identity and social mobilisation has risen. The difference between the two forms of explosion is that while the new national government espoused ethnicity as a legitimate basis of political representation, it insisted that

religion be kept as a private matter. The latter position may be the least that is expected from a secular neo-liberal state. However, this should not imply that identity politics and practice of religion are in practice always clearly separated. Rather, the religious basis of identification lends support to ethnic (sometimes represented as national) identity under some circumstances and under other circumstances they crosscut each other's boundary. Since there is no complete empirical overlap between these two bases of identification in southern Ethiopia, bringing one of them to the foreground might sometimes mean pushing the other into the background. But they both are engaging, albeit in different ways. In Ethiopia during the time of post-socialist fervour to capture history, as it were, religion has been empirically less violent as compared to ethnicity. Perhaps due to this, the scholarly attention given to this relatively less violent yet deeply engaging aspect of the post-socialist reality is far too limited as compared to that accorded to ethnicity. Against such a backdrop, I hope this paper will be a contribution towards an adequate understanding of this issue of immense importance.

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