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Nega Angore, T.

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Reconstructing Ethiopia's Collective Memory by Rewriting its History: The Politics of Islam

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan
Tilburg University
op gezag van de rector magnificus,
prof. dr. E.H.L. Aarts,
in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een
door het college voor promoties aangewezen commissie
in de Ruth First zaal van de Universiteit

op maandag 4 december 2017 om 10.00 uur

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Tekalign Nega Angore,
geboren op 11 maart 1980 te Wolita Soddo, Ethiopië
Promotor: Prof. dr. H.L. Beck
Copromotor: Dr. J. van der Aa

Overige leden van de promotiecommissie:
Prof. dr. G.J. Abbink
Prof. dr. W.E.A. van Beek
Prof. dr. J.M.E. Blommaert
Prof. dr. D. Douwes

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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................................. III

ABBREVIATIONS ............................................................................................................................... VIII

NOTES ON ARABIC AND AMHARIC TRANSLITERATION ............................................................. XI

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................... 1

1.1 BACKGROUND ........................................................................................................................... 1
1.2 HISTORICAL RELATIONS: THE STATES AND THE RELIGIOUS ........................................... 3
  1.2.1 Religion as a source of legitimacy ..................................................................................... 3
  1.2.2 Religion as an obstacle to socialist ideals ......................................................................... 4
1.3 EPRDF’S RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND CONTENTIONS ..................................................... 5
1.4 RESEARCH GAPS ..................................................................................................................... 7
  1.4.1 Shortcomings of earlier studies (Pre-1990s) ..................................................................... 7
  1.4.2 Shortcomings of contemporary studies (post-1991) ....................................................... 10
1.5 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS .................................................... 13
1.6 ROADMAP ................................................................................................................................ 18

CHAPTER TWO: THEORIES AND METHODS ................................................................................. 21

2.1 INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................................... 21
2.2 RELIGIOUS POLICY ................................................................................................................ 21
2.3 INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS: UNWRITTEN RULES ............................................................. 22
2.4 SUPERDIVERSITY ................................................................................................................... 25
  2.4.1 The “diversification of diversity” .................................................................................... 26
  2.4.2 The primary conditions of superdiversity ...................................................................... 27
2.5 COLLECTIVE MEMORY ......................................................................................................... 29
  2.5.1 The resurgence of collective memory ........................................................................... 30
  2.5.2 The past that never passed ............................................................................................ 31
  2.5.3 Collective memory, individual memory, and knowing .................................................. 31
  2.5.4 Fundamental premises .................................................................................................... 32
2.6 THEORIES OF SOCIAL REMEMBERING ............................................................................... 33
  2.6.1 Presentist approach: Inventions .................................................................................... 33
  2.6.2 Popular level approach: Contest .................................................................................. 35
  2.6.3 Dynamic memory approach: Negotiations .................................................................. 36
2.7 COLLECTIVE MEMORY: ACTIVISM, AND IDENTITY ....................................................... 36
2.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN ....................................................................... 38
  2.8.1 Research philosophy ...................................................................................................... 38
  2.8.2 Research field ................................................................................................................ 40
  2.8.3 Research subjects ........................................................................................................ 43
  2.8.4 Data collection procedures ........................................................................................... 45
  2.8.5 Formal and informal policies ........................................................................................ 47
  2.8.6 Online data sources ....................................................................................................... 48
  2.8.7 Conspiracy documents .................................................................................................. 51
  2.8.8 The state media ............................................................................................................ 53
  2.8.9 Periodization ................................................................................................................ 55

CHAPTER THREE: NATIONHOOD AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY ...................................................... 57

3.1 INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................................... 57
3.2 THE NOTION OF A CHRISTIAN ETHIOPIA ............................................................................ 58
3.3 A CHRISTIAN NATION: SUGGESTING CRITERIA ................................................................ 60
  3.3.1 Looking into similar contemporary contexts ............................................................... 61
  3.3.2 Looking into history ...................................................................................................... 64
3.4 CONTESTING THE IMAGE OF CHRISTIAN ETHIOPIA ....................................................... 66
3.5 A TROUBLED AND EMBELLISHED PAST ......................................................................... 69
3.6 ETHIOPIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST: ALLIANCE AND SUSPICIONS ................................. 71
3.7 CHRISTIANITY IN ETHIOPIA ................................................................................................. 75
  3.7.1 Formative periods ......................................................................................................... 75
  3.7.2 Pious but “illegitimate” dynasty ................................................................................... 76
  3.7.3 The “legitimate” Solomonic dynasty ........................................................................... 77
CHAPTER FIVE: THE EPRDF’S DEPICTION OF ETHIOPIAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY: INVENTIONS, CONTESTS, AND NEGOTIATIONS ........................................... 137

5.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................. 137
5.2 BACKGROUND OF THE EPRDF ........................................................................ 138
  5.2.1 Formation ....................................................................................................... 138
  5.2.2 Senior-junior relations .................................................................................. 140
  5.2.3 Democracy and political space .................................................................... 141
5.3 EPRDF’S OVERARCHING NARRATIVE: ETHNICITY ........................................... 142
  5.3.1 The past, the present, and the ideal ............................................................. 142
  5.3.2 Ethnic marginalization and economic narrative ........................................... 144
  5.3.3 Unity in diversity ......................................................................................... 148
5.4 EPRDF’S DEPICTION OF ETHIOPIA’S RELIGIOUS PAST ................................. 150
  5.4.1 Marginalization ........................................................................................... 150
  5.4.2 EPRDF’s constitutional rhetoric: Secularism .............................................. 155
  5.4.3 Who benefited? ........................................................................................... 165
5.5 CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................... 171

CHAPTER SIX: EPRDF POLICY: CHANGES, CAUSES, ROLE, AND REACTION (PRE-2001) ......... 175

6.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................. 175
6.2 COURTING SUPPORT (A PRE-1995 STANCE) ..................................................... 175
  6.2.1 Background .................................................................................................. 175
  6.2.2 Religious or ethnic conflict? ......................................................................... 176
  6.2.3 The question of the Sharia court .................................................................. 178
  6.2.4 A pre-1991 stance of TPLF ........................................................................ 179
  6.2.5 Religion as propaganda machinery ............................................................... 185
  6.2.6 Religious freedom ....................................................................................... 187
  6.2.7 The Anwar Mosque incident and its aftermath ........................................... 189
  6.2.8 Conclusion ................................................................................................... 193
6.3 AN EXTERNAL THREAT (1996–2001) ................................................................. 195
  6.3.1 Ethiopia’s role in destabilizing Somalia ....................................................... 196
  6.3.2 Ethiopia’s interest in Somalia ....................................................................... 198
  6.3.3 Historical relations: Somalia and Ethiopia .................................................... 199
  6.3.4 Somalia in the Ethiopian Somali Regional State .......................................... 200
CHAPTER SEVEN: EPRDF POLICY: CHANGES, CAUSES, ROLE, AND REACTION (POST-2001) .................. 211
7.1 CLEANSING THE EIASC FROM WAHABISM INFLUENCE (2001-2005) ........................................ 212
7.1.1 Background .......................................................................................................................... 212
7.1.2 Internal power struggle ........................................................................................................ 212
7.1.3 Ethiopia’s new role in the Global War on Terrorism ............................................................ 214
7.1.4 Intra-religious and interreligious conflicts .......................................................................... 219
7.1.5 Foreign policy: Islamic radicalism ....................................................................................... 222
7.1.6 The 2005 election: Muslims as allies .................................................................................... 228
7.1.7 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 231
7.2.1 Background .......................................................................................................................... 232
7.2.2 The mosques as competitive spaces .................................................................................... 233
7.2.3 Reclaiming the EIASC ........................................................................................................ 234
7.2.4 Interreligious conflicts ......................................................................................................... 236
7.2.5 Cultural programming .......................................................................................................... 239
7.2.6 The narrowing of political space .......................................................................................... 241
7.2.7 Ethiopia and Somalia ............................................................................................................ 242
7.2.8 New proclamations and regulations: Quelling dissent .......................................................... 243
7.2.9 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 247
7.3 DOMESTICATION (2009-PRESENT): A PREEMPTIVE MEASURE .................................................. 248
7.3.1 Religious conflicts as security issues ..................................................................................... 249
7.3.2 The genesis of public protest ............................................................................................... 250
7.3.3 State media .......................................................................................................................... 252
7.3.4 Meles Zenawi’s parliamentary remarks: A tolerant culture and a secular constitution threatened 253
7.3.5 State training materials: The discourse of religious extremism .............................................. 258
7.3.6 Many religions, one nation documentary: Radicalism as threat to religious diversity .......... 260
7.3.7 Jihadawi Harekat documentary: The conspiracy narrative .................................................... 266
7.3.8 Why was Sheik Nuru assassinated? documentary: Radicalism turning into terror ................ 271
7.3.9 Non-state media: Religious interference ............................................................................. 273
7.3.10 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 281

CHAPTER EIGHT: A RHETORIC OF SENSIBILITY ................................................................................. 283
8.1 BACKGROUND ........................................................................................................................... 283
8.2 REPERTORIES OF COLLECTIVE ACTIONS: CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS ....................... 283
8.3 WHAT IS AT STAKE? .................................................................................................................. 286
8.4 WHICH NARRATIVE? ................................................................................................................ 293
8.4.1 State interference .................................................................................................................. 294
8.4.2 Religious radicalism .............................................................................................................. 296
8.5 THE DISASPORA ETHIOPIAN MUSLIMS .................................................................................... 299
8.6 THE POLITICS OF “OTHERING” ............................................................................................... 300
8.7 DISCREDING THE “OTHER” ...................................................................................................... 302
8.7.1 The intolerant “other” ........................................................................................................... 302
8.7.2 The anti-Islamic state ............................................................................................................ 305
8.7.3 Anti-Islamic “sect” ................................................................................................................ 311
8.7.4 The hermeneutics of suspicion ............................................................................................... 315
8.8 A PEACEFUL MEANS ............................................................................................................... 319
8.9 CONCLUSION .............................................................................................................................. 320

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION ........................................................................................................... 323
9.1 INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 323
9.2 SUMMARY OF RESULTS .......................................................................................................... 323
9.3 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS ......................................................................................................... 330
9.4 IMPLICATIONS ............................................................................................................................ 338
9.4.1 Implication for knowledge ..................................................................................................... 338
**ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAIC</td>
<td>Al-Ahbash Islamic Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAPO</td>
<td>All Amhara People Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACMP</td>
<td>Arbitration Committee of Muslim Protesters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHIF</td>
<td>Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIASC</td>
<td>Addis Ababa Islamic Affairs Supreme Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIAI</td>
<td>Al-Ittihad al-Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMMS</td>
<td>Awolia Muslim Mission School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARPCT</td>
<td>Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>British Broadcasting Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBN</td>
<td>Berekah Broadcasting Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Bilal Show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIC</td>
<td>Council of Islamic Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>Cable News Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPJ</td>
<td>The Committee to Protect Journalists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSA</td>
<td>Central Statistical Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DW</td>
<td>Deutsche Welle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBC</td>
<td>Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECC</td>
<td>Ethiopian Catholic Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECFE</td>
<td>Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDMD</td>
<td>Ethiopian Diaspora Muslim Delegations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFPC</td>
<td>Ethiopian Federal Police Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIASC</td>
<td>Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIRC</td>
<td>Ethiopian Interreligious Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELF</td>
<td>Eritrean Liberation Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMDAC</td>
<td>Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora Associations Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMYL</td>
<td>Ethiopian Muslim Youth League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EOTC</td>
<td>Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahado Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPRDF</td>
<td>Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPRDM</td>
<td>Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESAT</td>
<td>Ethiopian Satellite Television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESDL</td>
<td>Ethiopian Somali Democratic League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETV</td>
<td>Ethiopian Television</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FHF  First Hijira Foundation
FID  Fidake Islamic Dawa
FPA  Federal Prison Administration
FPC  Federal Police Commission
FR  Fith Radio
GTP  Growth and Transformation Plan
GWOT  Global War on Terrorism
HRW  Human Rights Watch
IAP  Imam Ahmad Production
IC  Islamic Courts
IFLO  Islamic Front for Liberation of Oromia
IIRO  International Islamic Relief Organization
IPI  Interfaith Peace Building Initiative
IRFR  International Religious Freedom Report
IWS  Internet World Stats
LEMBA  Luqman Ethiopian-Muslims Association
MoE  Ministry of Education
MoFA  Ministry of Federal Affairs
MoFED  Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
MoI  Ministry of Information
MWL  Muslim World League
NEA  Bureau for Near Eastern Affairs
NGOs  Non-governmental Organizations
NIF  National Islamic Front
NISC  National Intelligence & Security Service
NPP  Nejashi Printing Press
OAU  Organization of African Unity
OLF  Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF  Ogaden National Liberation Front
OPDO  Oromo People’s Democratic Organization
ORA  Office for Regional Affairs
PDTCE  Peaceful and Democratic Transitional Conference of Ethiopia
PMG  Provisional Military State of Ethiopia
PRC  Pew Research Center
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RN</td>
<td>Radio Najāshī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SALF</td>
<td>Somali Abbo Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCIC</td>
<td>Supreme Council of Islamic Courts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEM</td>
<td>Swedish Evangelical Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEPDM</td>
<td>Somali Abbo Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNF</td>
<td>Somali National Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPDL</td>
<td>Somali People Democratic League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPDP</td>
<td>Somali People Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPL</td>
<td>Somali People League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPLA</td>
<td>Sudan People’s Liberation Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPNN</td>
<td>Southern Peoples Nations and Nationalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TGE</td>
<td>Transitional State of Ethiopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDTCE</td>
<td>Peaceful, And Democratic Transitional Conference of Ethiopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPLF</td>
<td>Tigray People’s Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UDJ</td>
<td>Unity for Democracy and Justice Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNISOM II</td>
<td>United Nation Operation Somalia II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URI</td>
<td>United Religions Initiative (URI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USDOS</td>
<td>United States Department of States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOA</td>
<td>Voice of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSDP</td>
<td>Western Somalia Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSLF</td>
<td>Western Somali Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes on Arabic and Amharic Transliteration

The Arabic transliteration and translation follows the system adopted by the Encyclopedia of Islam, edited by Juan E. Campo as part of The Encyclopedia of World Religions Series. The Amharic transliteration used Encyclopedia Aethiopica with some modifications. The names of people, organizations, and radio programs follow their locally spelled forms. Titles of books, journals, and articles in non-Amharic languages are also written according to their original forms. I have used the first names of the authors to cite both Ethiopian and Eritrean names.
Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

The public protest of Muslims in Ethiopia against the state and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) begun in January 2012. The graduating class of Arabic students at the Awolia Muslim Mission School (AMMS) fueled the onset of the public protest. The students’ initial requests primarily aimed at reversing the administrative decisions of the EIASC, widely known among the Muslim communities as the Majlis. The appeal was to open the Arabic Department that had been shut down and to re-install the personnel dismissed by the EIASC leadership.

Unsurprisingly, the EIASC took the appeal lightly. It did not act positively and promptly on the students’ request. The EIASC’s initial impressions of the dissidents were mainly as a handful of youths influenced by the radical teachings of Wahhabism. In a few weeks, as many young Muslims joined the public protest, mobilizing large numbers, the protest turned into a nationwide Islamic movement, primarily of the youth. This unprecedented and protracted protest strictly espoused nonviolence and presented Islam as a religion of peace. እስላም ከላም (Islam is peace) is the slogan that the youth chanted to indicate the peaceful nature of the public demonstrations.

The immediate trigger of the protest was a letter dispatched from the leadership of the EIASC, dated December 31, 2011. The letter instructed the immediate closure of the Arabic department of AMMS. It also expelled 50 Arabic teachers, some administrative personnel, and the imams (leaders of a group prayer, Salat) of the school’s mosque. The EIASC leadership did not give any warning prior to its actions, even though the labor law of the nation requires it. As a replacement for the previous imam, the leadership assigned a new imam. The students rejected the newly assigned imam on the perception that he follows the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam, which they viewed as un-Islamic. In the official rhetoric of the EIASC, the cause of such an administrative decision has two versions. In one version, the decision was temporary, only until the leadership finds a way to marshal sufficient finances to cover the budget deficit. In the other version, the decision was part of a strategy to dismantle a radical Islamic ideology harbored in the school’s religious curriculum.

The immediate context of the protest was that only six months earlier AMMS was brought under the auspices of the EIASC. Prior to that, for most of its history, the school had secured its funding from a Saudi-based NGO, International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO). Due to the influence of IIRO, the school and its mosque are under the influence of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. With the passing of the January 2009 “Charities and Societies Proclamation,” otherwise known as the NGO law, IIRO could not continue funding AMMS. As AMMS’ partnership with IIRO ended, according to the arrangement with the state, the school administration was transferred to the EIASC. Those that strictly oppose the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam lead the EIASC.
The second important context is the newly forged cooperation between the EIASC, the Ministry of Federal Affairs (MoFA), and the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam. The EIASC in cooperation with MoFA started providing training. The training was about religious radicalism, and the trainees were Ethiopian Muslim clerics recruited from all over Ethiopia. This began in July 2011. The deployment of Lebanese trainers anxious to expound religious radicalism has become a contentious issue among the Muslim communities. The Lebanese trainers follow the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam and strongly oppose the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. The presence of the state officials to give training in radicalism from the perspective of the Ethiopian constitution has also become a concern viewed as interference in the religious affairs of the Muslim communities.

Following the students’ protest, enraged Muslims started to flock to the AMMS compound every Friday. Muslim youths at universities also played a significant role, given that the dissident Muslim representatives had earned a reputation as dais (preachers) among them. Progressively, the dissidents construed the underlying issue in terms of legitimate representation and religious interference. The legitimate representation question related to the elections of EIASC leaders, while religious interference is a complaint against the stance of the state towards its own Muslim population.

In less than six months, not only did the public demonstrations spread throughout the Muslim communities, but they also became waves of opposition that swept the major mosques in Addis Ababa and the regions. The students’ administrative dissent progressively took another detour, the narrative of religious interference, via the successful appropriation of both online and offline repertoires of collective actions. In the protest movement and related activism, collective memory has become a schematic narrative template that organizes and animates the collective actions, as well as being a frame in which dissident Muslims locate and find meaning for their present experience. Taking into account that collective memories affect social reality, the dynamics of constructing collective memory in relation to the politics of Muslim identity form the subject matter of this research. In this research, the state and the dissident Muslims are viewed as crucial memory entrepreneurs who seized the protest movement as opportunity to spread the revisionist histories to the wider Muslim communities in Ethiopia. The overall endeavor of this research is thus to explore how collective memory can be harnessed by memory entrepreneurs to agitate and reinforce a meta-political narrative among Ethiopian Muslim communities. The examination of the self-narrative of Ethiopian Muslim identity rhetoric reveals the process of forming collective memory and the politics of Muslim identity.
1.2 Historical Relations: The States and the Religious

The dissident Muslims’ narrative of religious interference successfully employs the available historical relations of Ethiopian states and the religious. Historically, both the monarchs and the military regime have done their best to influence and mobilize the religious for political ends. In the post-1991 era, the same charge continued against the state, despite its espousal of secularism and its constitution that upholds religious freedom, equality, and the principle of non-discrimination. The December 21, 2015 result of the Pew Research Center (PRC) (2015) also rates Ethiopians first in the world in terms of importance of religion, with 98% of the respondents stating that religion is very important in their lives. Since the Ethiopian society is deeply religious, the charge that the ruling party is co-opting religion is not as such an innovation in the nation’s political history.

In order to show that religion has always been important in the Ethiopian society and the previous states, despite their differences, in the following sections, I present the historical context of the state and religious institutions. In the following two sub-sections, I indicate that the monarchical states used the EOTC as a source of legitimacy for their throne (1.2.1), while the socialist Derg viewed religion as an undesirable historical heritage (1.2.2).

1.2.1 Religion as a source of legitimacy

Crummey (2006, p. 457) characterizes the pre-1974 period of historic Ethiopian Christianity by “royal dominance.” The monarchs assumed the spiritual leadership of Yä-Ityoppaya Ortodoksawit Täwahədo Betä Kræstiyan or the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Church (EOTC).1 The kings invoked and presided over councils on matters of faith and appointed major figures in the church (Ancel & Ficquet, 2015, p. 66; Shiferaw, 2015, p. 161). Merara (2002, p. 77) also aptly depicts the relationship between the monarchical states and the church as symbiotic, where the church provided ideological legitimacy for the state and the state in return bestowed protection. Similarly, S.A. Hussien (2007, p. 261) characterizes the pre-1974 period as “… long-established alliance and mutual interdependence between church and state…”

The cleaving of the imperial regimes with the EOTC had a role in relegating Ethiopian Muslims to the margin of politics and is a frequent theme that emerges among Ethiopian Muslim Activists. In monarchical regimes, especially after the 13th century, the nationhood of Ethiopia was correlated with Christianity, and Islam had a secondary status. Notwithstanding that the prejudice of ethnicity and the center-periphery tension in Ethiopian history played a more significant role in political representations, the share of Ethiopian Muslims in Ethiopian monarchs is not commensurate with

---

1 The term EOTC became the official name of the church only after the second half of the 19th century controversy, hence the anachronisms for earlier periods. From the perspective of its doctrine, however, it fits with the church’s position since the 4th century, and later debates are mainly the results of the influences of Catholic missionaries. For the sake of consistency, I continue to employ the term throughout its history.
their number. In this research, I examine how the Muslim activists and the state view the historical marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims. Particularly, I emphasize inventions, contests, and negotiations in the construction of competing usable pasts.

1.2.2 Religion as an obstacle to socialist ideals

The revolutionary socialist military state that seized power in 1974, called the Derg (which means committee), did not ignore the religious institutions but rather approached them differently than the monarchs. As a socialist state, it committed itself to scientific socialism, which led to ambitiously championing measures that relegated religious matters to the private spheres. The endeavor was to tame the influence of religion upon the society rather than using it as a source of political legitimacy. Compared to other religious communities, in the new political arrangement, the EOTC lost a lot, as the state’s affairs were officially divorced from the church.

The Derg regime’s initial years were years of gain to Islam. On the ground of inclusive citizenship, the state abolished the legal restrictions on the public activities of the Muslims, in particular, the celebrations of *id al-Fitr* (the celebration of the final breaking of the fast), *id al-Adha* (the feast of the sacrifice), and *Mawlid* (the birthday of the prophet Muhammad). The measure was partially a positive response to the April 20, 1974 public demonstration requests in Addis Ababa. The Muslim demonstrators’ demands numbered 13. The state did not answer all but agreed to rectify some of the inequalities and the injustice. Among these were the acceptance of three Islamic holidays as public holidays and the banning of the use of “Muslims living in Ethiopia” in the official address and replacing it with “Ethiopian Muslims.” Soon after, however, the socialist-oriented state turned against all religious establishments, and Islam was no exception.

In relation to Islam, the socialist government introduced anti-Islamic laws and regulations. The abolishment and nationalization of *Waqf* (a religious endowment), the persecution of its eminent representatives, the prohibition of proselytizing, and a ban on importing Arabic-Islamic books from abroad were a few of the regime’s edicts that were clearly anti-Islamic (Gori, 2015, p. 71). The fate of the nascent EIASC, which was established on March 13, 1976, fell under its stringent control (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 7; Østebø, 2012, p. 174). In fact, during the Derg regime, the EIASC’s scope was limited to facilitating *Hajj* (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca). Sheikh Muhammad Thani Habib, who was the first leader of the EIASC, lost his two sons at the hands of the Derg, a move to instill fear and obedience to the new regime (Eide, 2000, p. 113). Since the dissident Muslims and the state viewed the Derg regime as religiously oppressive, in the construction of a usable past the period is consensual.

In this brief review of the historical relations between the religious sector and the Ethiopian states, I showed that religion played a significant role in the previous Ethiopian states, albeit
differently. As I indicated, the monarchical states used religion to justify their rule. The result was a symbiotic relationship between the EOTC and the monarchical states and the marginalization of the Muslim communities from political leadership. In the socialist Derg reign, however, the concept of religion was an obstacle to the implementation of scientific socialism. Because of scientific socialism, the overall attempt of the state was to reduce the influence of religion on the society, which it viewed as a sign of backwardness.

1.3 EPRDF’s Religious Freedom and Contentions

When the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in 1991, by ousting the military regime, it declared religious freedom and equality for all religious adherents. The constitution of 1995 further provided a legal framework that strictly separated the state’s affairs from religion.² Particularly, the constitution declared educational institutions as secular and free from cultural, political, and religious influences.

In the reign of the EPRDF, Ethiopian Muslims and Protestants have enjoyed unprecedented religious freedom. The devolution of the state also increased the political participation of the Muslim communities. Despite institutional clauses and measures promoting religious freedom and equality, the EPRDF was not exempt from charges of religious interference. To the Muslim activists, the initial unfettered freedom of Muslims became constrained over time as the EPRDF ensured that leaders of the EIASC were under its influences. Until recently, Muslims were tolerant of the invisible hands of the state operating through the EIASC even though the legitimacy of their institution as the independent national representative of Muslims increasingly dwindled. In order to highlight the role of the present in the construction of a usable past, I also explore the present needs, interests, fears and aspirations of the state in the post-1991 period by examining the state’s policies towards the Muslim communities in Ethiopia. In doing so, I highlight how the past is considered as a narrative template that frames the present experience. For most of the years the EPRDF reigned, the overall attitude of Ethiopian Muslims has been that they fared well in exercising religious freedom and equality. Prior to the contentious 2007 Central Statistics Authority (CSA) report that the Muslim communities viewed as underestimating their percentage, and prior to the controversy surrounding the wearing of hijab in educational institutions, there was a consensus on the status of religious freedom for Ethiopian Muslims. Beginning in 2011, how the state viewed Al-Ahbash and Wahhabis interpretations has become a contentious issue in relation to the status of religious freedom.

The recent contentions within the Muslim communities and the state invoke narratives and counternarratives. For Muslim activists, the underlying problem is the state and the corrupted

² The present Ethiopian constitution was approved on December 8, 1994 but has been in effect since 1995. Following other academic works, I refer to it as the 1995 constitution.
EIASC. To them, the state has continued to violate the constitutional enshrined rights through undue interference via the EIASC. In this narrative, Muslims and Islam are the targets. The state also accuses the Muslim activists of having a politically disguised agenda inspired and supported by Wahhabism ideology, which the state considers as a foreign import that negatively transforms the long-held religious tolerance culture of Ethiopia and potentially creates discord in the social fabric.

The issue at hand clearly defies simplistic categorizations that attempt to explain the overall phenomenon through an either/or narrative without entailing so much reductionism. The developments within the Muslim communities cannot be explained merely by externalizing the interpretation as a radical foreign imported ideology (which the state usually does). Considering the developments as a political maneuver of the state to divide its society in order to extend its grip on power (which the opposition political parties claim) or merely a negative reaction to the interference of the state in religious affairs (which Muslim activists claim) does not do justice to the overall phenomenon. The attempt of this research is thus to study the complex relation of the Ethiopian state and Islam from 1991 to 2015. In documenting the recent developments among Ethiopian Muslim communities, I present the national development as local, developments in the Horn of Africa as regional, and development beyond the Horn of Africa as global.

In this research, I seek to establish that the early 1990s friendship stance of the state in courting the support of the Muslim communities has changed. The need for courting support from the Muslim communities has given prominence to the theme of the historic marginalization of the Muslim community, although religion played a secondary role compared to ethnic identity. In the mid-1990s, due to regional development in both neighboring Sudan and Somalia, the state started to list Islamic fundamentalism in its top threats that might have long-term implications. In the memory construction of the state, it continued to extol Ethiopian Muslims and Ethiopian Islam as immune from the perceived Islamic radicalism incursions from the neighboring countries. In doing so, the state fostered the narrative that the neighboring Muslim nations are a threat to its security. The post-2001 events also witnessed changes in the state policy.

The state policy of the period between 2001 and 2005 came to purge the leadership of the EIASC in order to curb the growing intra-religious conflicts and the interreligious polemics. In the memory construction project of the state, the state continued to extol the historic Ethiopian Islam. It construed Sufism as tolerant and Wahhabism as a newly imported radical ideology that destabilizes the existing religious tolerance. From 2006 until 2008, the state promoted interfaith dialogue as a legitimate precept of Christianity and Islam that promotes religious tolerance. Such an approach was needed as a means of reconciling the sporadic but increasingly systematic violence against Ethiopian Christians. The state memory construction process of the period emphasized the historic religious tolerance in the society and framed dissent in terms of covert political ideology. Since 2009,
however, the state has actively taken preemptive measures intended in a way to domesticate Islam and contain the influences of radical interpretations. In the following section, I explain the existing research gaps of earlier studies (before the 1990s) and contemporary studies (after the 1990s) in order to highlight how my research contributes to filling some of the research gaps identified.

1.4 Research Gaps

Given Islam’s heritage in Ethiopian national life and history, there is a fair consensus among scholars that works on Islam indeed are poorly reflected in volume when compared to Christianity (Crummey, 1990, p. 118). Islam, until recently, has been a neglected and marginalized research theme in Ethiopian studies. The available works exhibit a shortage given its long heritage in the nation and its multifaceted historical interaction with the predominantly Christian culture (Jon Abbink, 1998, p. 110; A. Hussien, 2001, pp. xvi-xvii; Insoll, 2003, p. 39; Kassaye, 2009, p. 11). The Italian scholar Enrico Cerulli, despite its limited coverage and his use of exclusively written sources, is credited as the founder of scholarly research on Islam in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa (A. Hussien, 2005 pp. 413-414). The scarce existing publications on Islam, both the earliest and the contemporary, are also not without criticism. In the following sections, I organize the shortcomings into two periods, the pre-1990s (1.4.1) and post-1990s (1.4.2).

1.4.1 Shortcomings of earlier studies (Pre-1990s)

The earlier works of Ethiopian Islam, i.e. before the 1990s, have four major shortcomings. The first predicament relates to the research paradigm with which the studies start. The studies’ main paradigms were oriental centrist Semitist paradigms where Islam is dealt with only in relation to the central Christian kingdom, not as a subject of its own (A. Hussien, 1994, p. 777). Perhaps the term centrist Semitist requires explanation.

In the linguistic and the ethnic sense, Semitic reflects the Amhara, the Tigray, and other people groups in Ethiopia. In Ethiopian studies, however, the Semitist orientation as a research paradigm primarily refers to the Christian Amhara and Tigray. The term centrist also indicates the historic Ethiopian polity of the monarchs, the Amhara, and the Tigray, as a point of reference both in defining Ethiopia and in studying it. With the exception of a few ethnicities, Ethiopian Muslims are not mainly Semitist in ethnic origin. They are also mainly from the periphery, not the center. Thus, the Semitist centrist paradigm refers to the Amhara and the Tigray component of modern Ethiopia that is still predominantly Christian.

Teshale (1995, p. xxiii) in this line, for example, remarks in his forward to his book that, “Due to the hegemonic weight of the Aksumite and Orientalist Semitist paradigms in Ethiopian studies, the history of the peoples as outlandish to the Ge’ez civilization has been referred to in passing
footnotes.” Tibebu is not alone in his assessment. Levine (2000, p. 70) argues the same. To him, the Semitist scholarly assumption led to the non-Semitic component of Amhara-Tigrayan culture and the indigenous traditions of other Ethiopian peoples being treated as a peripheral matter. For these scholars, the exclusion of Islam in Ethiopia from Ethiopian studies is part of the general pattern of neglecting other people groups whose religious affiliation relates to Islam.

As Hearn (2006 p. 53) remarks, notwithstanding the Christian heritage and reputation, the country has a rich Islamic history as well and is home to large, dynamic Muslim communities. Given the fact that Muslims’ religion has constituted the basis of the cultural identity of a sizeable part of the Ethiopian population (34% or more), it should not have been treated as an external threat to the Ethiopian polity (A. Hussien, 2001, p. 188). Thus, the dominant perspective of the earlier scholarly works could be criticized as a narrow analytical model of Christian dominance and Muslim marginalization (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 3). This model resulted in more scholarly prominence and focus on the center and consequently the marginalization of the peripheries.

According to Kinfe (1994, p. 115), however, the neglect of Islam in the Haile Selassie regime was beyond the dominant research paradigm. The shortage, therefore, was an intentional political maneuver that systematically designed to depict the nation as fundamentally Christian. Kinfe claims that official statistics intentionally underestimated the number of Muslims in the country to create an impression that Ethiopia is purely a Christian nation. Kapteijns (2000, p. 240) also argues that Haile Selassie’s regime kept the size of the nation’s population of Muslims secret in order to present Ethiopia as a Christian nation. In this line of argument, the desire of the monarchical states to portray the nation as primarily Christian contributed to the neglect of Islam as a research area.

Notwithstanding the fact that the presentation of the state as fundamentally Christian is flawed, the charge that the Ethiopian state underestimated its population in the official statistics does not have strong objective evidence. Before the 1984 census, the available demographic data sources were estimates of foreigners, so the reliability of their methods was dubious. As A. Hussien (2002, p. 188) documented, there are arbitrariness and agenda in the percentage claims of various foreign sources. This becomes more evident in the fact that the estimate ranges from one-third to 75%.

The arbitrariness of the Ethiopian Muslim population was noted very early. Singer (1971, p. 134) remarked that “Estimates (no official census has ever been taken) run from under a million to over nine million out of an estimated twenty-five million total population.” The Statistical Authority’s population census for the years 1984, 1994, and 2007, however, relatively stabilized the percentage of Muslims within 33%. The demographic statistics are still contentious but likely more reliable than all the available estimates. Given that the Derg state did not specifically target the Muslim communities and the EPRDF pursued the policy of courting support from the Muslim community, the understatement thesis is less tenable.
Notwithstanding the notion that presenting Ethiopia as a Christian nation might affect negatively the scholarly pursuit of Islam in the Haile Selassie regime, attributing the neglect to imperial imposition has no empirical ground. The criticism fails to consider that the few available scholarly works were the handiwork of foreigners who assumed the role of advisers to the imperial regime and/or professors at Addis Ababa University (formerly known as Haile Selassie University). The fact that foreign scholars worked for the Haile Selassie state and produced scholarly works without obstruction makes the intentional subversion thesis less tenable. Thus, the neglect of Islam was more the byproduct of the prevailing Semitist paradigm than an intentional maneuver of the state.

The second predicament relates to the few existing earlier scholarly works on Ethiopian Islam. The scholarly endeavors failed to capture the complexity of the Christian-Muslim relationship in Ethiopian history. The general pattern, following Trimingham’s groundbreaking work, was to present the relationship as one of peaceful coexistence. The depiction of the relationship, both by academic and popular sources, has been assumed to be peaceful and tolerant, mutually coexisting as neighbors (Braukämper, 2004, p. 4). In a similar tone, Braukämper (2004, p. 4) states that most of the time peaceful coexistence prevailed. Wondwosen and Jerusalem (2008) also espoused similar views, quoting the assessments of an international newspaper, the Washington Post (May 13, 2007). The newspaper reported, “It is a kind of coexistence that has endured despite the fact that Orthodox Christians have historically had the upper hand in Ethiopia, politically and economically.” The International Herald Tribune (October 5, 2006) similarly reported, “Ethiopia’s 77 million people are almost evenly split between Muslims and Christians, but clashes between the two religious groups are rare.”

Very recently, many scholars have questioned the “grand and peaceful cooperation” depiction of Christian-Muslim relations in the country. A. Hussien (2006 pp. 4-22), for example, succinctly argued that such embellishments over-emphasized the consensual nature and under-emphasized the conflictual aspect, which of course was part of the Christian-Muslim relationship. Such a narrative is evident in a popular level history book written by Ahmedin Jebel (2011b), a well-known activist for Muslim rights sentenced to 22 years in prison. The title of Ahmedin’s popular book is እትዬጲያውያን የሙስሊሞች ይነኩና ይትግል ምወከ ከ615-1700 (Ethiopian Muslims from 615-1700: A history of domination and resistance, part I). Upon its publication, the book became an instant celebrity.

The popular Islamic media gave him the title of a “history scholar.” In fact, such depictions are not only depictions of the nation’s past but also shape the contemporary Christian and Muslim relations. Even those scholars that accept the consensual nature of Christian-Muslim relations note that the much praised coexistence of the past was made possible only through power asymmetry, Christian dominance, and the marginalization of Muslims (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 3). As Kinfe (1994, p. 154) argues, the Ethiopian Muslims generally do feel they have been persecuted for their
beliefs and subdued by Christian rulers, while the Christians also feel bitter about the expansion of Islam into formerly Christian territories, indicating that the consensual nature is more of a wish than the reality on the ground. The overall argument of such approaches is that there has always been a power asymmetry between Christians and Muslims and the relationship has never been among equals.

The third scholarly predicament relates to the perception of the state towards Islamic-related scholarly works. The perceptions of existing works on Ethiopian Islam were as the handiwork of both Ethiopian and foreign scholars who oppose the state or have sympathies with anti-state movements (Braukämper, 2004, p. 3). Besides the biases of the state towards Islam, the criticisms of Ethiopian states also reflect some grains of truth. Especially in the later works, the selection and presentation give an impression that informants were mainly dissenting Muslims and those who espouse political independence from Ethiopia. Some of the studies indeed reflect the author’s strong sentiment against the central state and favor for the periphery and other ethnic groups due to the fact that the lens of marginalization from the political life of the nation was the primary grid for the overall phenomenon studied. Thus, the existing alternate depiction from the dominant historical narrative falls prey to being advocacy research.

Fourth, “Muslims’ everyday practices and beliefs, their histories and social roles, have been largely ignored” (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 2). In this regard, Harar is an exceptional site. Quite a number of anthropological works in relation to Islam as a lived experience surfaced in relation to this ancient Islamic city. As Abbink (1999 p. 24) notes about the study of Islam, “the perennial issue in the comparative study of Islam is how, as a faith and a way of life, Islam deals with diversity: religious, ethnic, or socio-cultural.” In light with the heritage of Islam in the nation, however, these significant perspectives were largely unaddressed until recent times. In this regard, however, groundbreaking works increasingly started emerging that take into account local contexts. The major predicament of these studies is that the areas under consideration present local realities in isolation, despite the fact that there have been interdependencies and intimate relationships among various parts of Ethiopia. However, comprehensive research that takes into account the historiography of Islam in Ethiopia did not get sufficient attention in the pre-1991 period.

1.4.2 Shortcomings of contemporary studies (post-1991)

Since the early 1990s, indeed, there has been an increasing trend towards Islamic publications. In order to redress the knowledge gaps, various scholarly and popular publications have come to the scene both from historical and anthropological perspectives (Braukämper, 2004, p. 12; A. Hussien, 2009, pp. 449-454). The recent scholarly interests in the study of contemporary Islam in the nation are attributed to the occasional contemporary tensions within the Muslim communities, the growing
tension with Christian religious communities, Ethiopia’s alliance in the Global War on Terrorism, the impact of reformist currents in transforming the existing social infrastructure, and the suspicion of radical Islam (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 4). In the contemporary Islamic studies, there are two competing depictions of the historical interactions of Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia.

The first depiction stresses peaceful coexistence while the second emphasizes violence and intolerance (A. Hussien, 2006 pp. 4-22). For example, Abbink (2007, p. 66) contends that the Christian-Muslim relationship has generally been characterized by one of accommodation and compromise, not of antagonism and strife. Ford (2009, p. 64), on the other hand, revisited Christian-Muslim relation in Ethiopia and concluded, “Overall, the frequency, length, and intensity of periods of conflict have without doubt outweighed periods of concord.” Østebø (2011, p. 186) attempted to reconcile these two divergent scholarly positions by making an analytical distinction at a micro level and macro level of the relationship with Christians. On the macro level, the relationship between Christians and Muslims has been of a more antagonistic nature. The macro interreligious relationship conception was largely characterized by recurring conflicts, while the micro level Christian-Muslim relations were seen as harmonious.

The macro and micro level distinction, despite its uses and analytical benefits, does not fairly capture the richness of the Ethiopian reality since interfaith relationships are communal by nature and the image of the other in one level translates easily into the other level, thereby blurring the conceptual distinctions. In the day-to-day interactions, the micro and macro also overlap. The relevance of the conception of the past, however, is evident in the contemporary debates among Muslims and Christians. The contemporary Christians espouse intolerant narratives of the past that emphasize the historical marginalization of Muslims in Ethiopian history. Part of the conviction emanates from the fact that, with the exception of the Derg, the histories of the monarchs were somehow on the other side of the EOTC. Thus, while the Ethiopian Muslims insist on the marginalization theme, the Christian counterparts insist on the hospitality and generosity of their leaders.

The contemporary studies on Islam are also not without shortcomings. First, there is a contention that the contemporary Islamic studies reflect more the perceptions, misconceptions, and personal impressions of their authors than the Ethiopian reality. Part of the reason is the fact that some of the new writings are characterized by biases, where scholarly investigation risks being overshadowed by polemic rhetoric (Østebø, 2011, p. 5). Such rhetoric is partly signifying the reality at hand.

The diversity of the Ethiopian society in terms of both religion and ethnicity has been always a source of compromise, accommodation, and tolerance as well as communal tension and conflict. Indeed, increased emphasis on Islamic consciousness and identity and the expanded role of Islam in
public life have often strained the delicate balance with Christians. Underneath the external appearances and impressions that had influenced existing perceptions and generalizations, there were undercurrents of tension, misunderstanding, competition, and potential and actual confrontation (A. Hussien, 2006 p. 19). One could easily notice such patterns from both academic and popular writings. The groups view each other’s writings with suspicion. Second, from a methodological perspective, the studies are conceived as heavily influenced by the Western post-Cold War paradigm based on the perceived threat of Islam (A. Hussien, 2009, p. 454).

Owing to the fact that Muslims in Ethiopia are diverse both in their ethno-linguistic backgrounds and practices, acquiring a strong indigenous character (Jon Abbink, 2007, pp. 67-70; Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 8; Hearn, 2006 p. 56), one would presume it could have been an interesting field of studies in terms of historical time depth as well as in terms of its contemporary phenomena and developments (Braukämper, 2004, p. 2). Besides the shortage of research outputs related to Ethiopian Islam, there is also a great dearth of research works related to contemporary Islamic revivalism. The neglect is ironic in the sense that Ethiopian magazines, newsletters, Internet sites, and even scholarship are afraid that it will help split the country (Carmichael, 2004, p. 231). A cursory review of local literature over the last decade would reveal that many Ethiopians, including Muslims, have a deep concern sometimes bordering on fear over the rise of Islamic fundamentalism (Carmichael, 1996, p. 169; 2004, p. 234). State policies have succeeded for the most part in subsuming religious difference or religious revivalism to that of ethno-linguistic identity (Carmichael, 2004, p. 244). The interaction of the global with the local is not inconsequential but rather also redefines “traditional identities, including those of religious systems, both in their local (indigenous African) and Universalist forms (Islam)” (Jan Abbink, 1999 p. 24).

As Østebø (2007, p. 1) remarks, “it is unfortunate that 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.” Such a gap requires an empirical study that contributes towards the filling of the vacuum. The shortage of research in Ethiopia will also continue to rise, as Islam is a dynamic religion that interacts with its contexts, and relatively fewer researchers make the effort to cope with its dynamism. The study of Islam, thus, could follow two broader directions. The first approach is to study it in terms of historical time depth while the second one is emphasizing its contemporary phenomena and development (Braukämper, 2004, p. 12). This research is that of the latter in kind. This does not mean, however, that the study will be devoid of the implications of historical legacies to the present conceptions. The understanding of present agendas as well as future aspiration requires looking into the past’s memory imprint. Part of such ambition has to begin with a realization that the problem at hand is complex and involves various actors and different contexts.
This study envisions combining both the historical time depth approach and the contemporary phenomenon. The overall endeavor of the research was to contribute modestly to the existing empirical research gaps. The contribution is empirical. Almost all of the recent studies conducted are limited to the periphery, and the neglect of the center from the attention of the researchers, Addis Ababa, is self-evident. This research thus attempts to fill both the dearth of literature on contemporary Islam and a complete absence of study that takes as its focus Addis Ababa. From the methodological perspective, also, the study will employ superdiversity as its research paradigm. Thus, rather than trying to simplify the reality with superimposed theoretical apparatuses, it attempts to understand the reality within its own context taking into account the complexity at hand. The use of collective memory and informal institutions is also as a heuristic tool rather than theory testing. This study hopes to balance those studies pursued to prove an existing theory.

1.5 Problem Statement and Research Questions

Following the decree of freedom of worship and religious equality in the post-1991 period, the regime took practical steps. It returned most of the confiscated properties to the appropriate religious bodies. The transitional state (1991-1995) even allowed religious-based political parties organized on ethnic lines to take part in the constituent assembly that rectified the constitution and to have seats in the transitional state. For example, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO) had 3 seats in the 87-member council of representatives of the interim state (Kinfe, 1994, p. 21).

The legality of religious political parties came to an abrupt end, however, through the issuance of the nation’s constitution prohibiting religion as an organizing principle. Given that, the lineage of the EPRDF is the 1970s student movement that unquestioningly supported the Marxist-Leninist ideology, the expulsion of religion from the political discourse does not surprise. In spite of the secular constitution’s prohibition of the involvement of religion in politics, the post-1991 policy of the state improved religious freedom and equality, which in turn paved a way for their increased public visibility.

The return of religion in the public sphere also brought religious fanaticism and an increased flocking of the faithful back to worship. Beside the monotheistic religions, mysticism, traditional religions, and witchcraft took their share and flourished (Dawit, 1994, p. 305). As the American Foreign Policy Council (2014, p. 399) succinctly puts it, “By and large, the Muslim community in Ethiopia has done well under the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) state.” In line with the newly espoused policy of religious freedom and equality, the state ended the restrictions on Hajj and on the import of religious literature; allowed the construction of mosques; and enabled the creation of Islamic organizations, newspapers, and magazines, which also resulted in several large public demonstrations (A. Hussien, 1994, pp. 791-792; Østebø, 2008, pp. 416-417).
The recent developments within Ethiopian Islam also “sparked a renewed focus on Islam both from the Ethiopian (Christian) public and from foreign observers” (Østebø, 2008, p. 430). The increased expressions of Islamic identity were also sources of concern for some. The reactions, however, were subtle, especially among Christian quarters. In some state schools, the wearing of the hijab and the performance of the ritual prayer within the premises of the schools have become a point of controversy (A. Hussien, 2006 p. 17). The smooth relations between the regime and the Muslims together with an increasing institutionalization of the Muslim communities went relatively unchecked in the first part of the 1990s. Islamic NGO activities also did not receive as much scrutiny at this time as during the Derg regime (Bellucci & Zaccaria, 2009, p. 110). On the national level, the state did not pay much attention to the impact of the reform movements in Islam and the internal strife among the Muslim population. The overall approach of the state was trying to keep public activism under control (Jon Abbink, 2007, p. 74).

The increment in religious activities also correlated with the emergence of various competing religious reform movements. The result has been increased intensity of discourse among the Muslim communities (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 3). As Østebø (2007, p. 1) aptly notes, “The revitalization 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 interreligious tensions, in turn sparking renewed focus on Islam both from the Ethiopian (Christian) public and from foreign observers.” The frequency of intra-religious and interreligious conflicts also increased in the pre-1991 period (Jon Abbink, 2007, p. 74).

For some scholars, the initial policy of the state towards Islam changed immediately after 4 or 5 years (Dereje, 2012, p. 1898; Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 15; Østebø, 2008, pp. 432-433; 2013, pp. 11-12). According to these scholars the mid-1990s marked a starting point of state repression of Islamic organizations and the tight control of the EIASC (Dereje, 2012, pp. 1899-1900; 2013, p. 34; Østebø, 2008, pp. 432-433; 2013, pp. 11-12). In this line of argument, the years 1995–96 signaled a revision in the regime’s attitudes and policies towards Islam. The immediate factors linked to an increased securitization of Islam in Ethiopia and the treating of Muslims as potential threat to national security were the attempt by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to kill then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during his working visit in Addis Ababa. Added to this was a violent conflict between the police and the worshippers in the Anwar Mosque in Addis Ababa, which caused the death of nine people and the wounding of 129. The result was that many Islamic associations and NGOs were closed down (Jon Abbink, 1998, p. 118).

The changing attitude of the state towards Islam is attributed to multiple factors. Particularly, the growth of the Islamic jihad in Eritrea; the military confrontations between Al-Ittihad, a Somali-based Islamic group that actively operated in the Ogaden region, and the Ethiopian state; and the hostility
between the EPRDF and the National Islamic Front of Sudan in the mid-1990s seem to be very crucial (Dereje, 2012, pp. 1899-1900; 2013, p. 34; Derje, 2014, p. 291). The main geopolitical factor that has shaped the EPRDF’s policy towards Islam in Ethiopia is, however, the “global war on terrorism” (Derje, 2014, p. 291). This geopolitical consideration seems to have greatly shaped the EPRDF’s understanding of the complex Islamic reform movements primarily through a security lens. The EPRDF has tightly controlled the EIASC leadership since 1995 with the pretext of avoiding similar incidents in the future (Dereje, 2012, p. 1900; 2013, p. 34).

The change in attitude was also further intensified after the 9/11 terror attacks, paving the way for discourses that linked events in the global arena with regional developments, particularly in Somalia. Things took a dramatic turn during the summer of 2011 when the EIASC organized an event in Harar. The EIASC conducted nationwide training in Harar for Muslim clerics about religious radicalism both from the precepts of the religion and the constitutional provisions. Al-Ahbash interpreters of Islam that came from Lebanon conducted the religious aspect of the training. The Lebanese trainers implicated Wahhabism and Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) ideologies as the root cause of religious radicalism and violence both in Ethiopia and throughout the world. The state officials also classified Wahhabism as incompatible with the secular state constitution that provided religious freedom and equality.

For some scholars, the year 2011 marked an increase in interference of the EPRDF in intra-religious Muslim affairs, fueling a strong protest from the Muslim communities (Østebø, 2013). The new interventionist stance of the state changed with the allegation of “fundamentalism.” As Desplat (2008, p. 162) indicates, the term fundamentalism became synonymous with Arab-inspired, foreign Islam that divides Ethiopian Muslims. The way the state uses the term has always had a political connotation. The employment of the term in relation to Islam relates to “foreign” states, i.e., associated with the neighboring states of Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia, with whom Ethiopia has a hostile relationship. Based on this attitude, local groups also came into the potential focus of the Ethiopian state. Desplat and Østebø (2013, p. 2) maintain that the Islamic fundamentalism discourse is a mirror image of the political elite’s perception of Islam as non-Ethiopian “other” or even a threat. These scholars disagree with the prevailing perception among many Ethiopian and foreign observers. To them, interpreting current developments on Islam, as increasingly political and Islamic fundamentalism as surfacing in the ranks of Ethiopian Muslims is unfounded. The growth of the number of mosques and the increasing number of Muslims holding state and public positions also should not serve as indirect evidence to prove that Ethiopian Muslims are aspiring to political power based on radical religious ideas (Carmichael, 2004, p. 169; Østebø, 2008, p. 430).

3 For a review of Islamic reform movements in Ethiopia, see Østebø (2007).
4 The choice of Harar as venue was not incidental; rather it was to show due respect to the founder of Al-Ahbash, who is from this very city.
Some scholars dismiss the radicalism narrative of Ethiopian Muslims, arguing that the
revivalism nature is not radicalism (Carmichael, 2004, p. 232). Dereje (2013, p. 15) maintains that
the classification of the revivalism as radicalism is groundless and it is part of the ruling party’s
scheme to prolong its power and a reason to narrow the political space. Other scholars, however,
without denying the negative role of Islamic radicalism, discount the role and the strength of
Wahhabism in disrupting the social infrastructure of religious tolerance (Dereje, 2013, p. 27; Desplat
& Østebø, 2013, p. 8; Mesfin, 2003, pp. 14-15; Østebø, 2008, pp. 431-432). For these scholars, Wahhabism in Ethiopia is mainly a Salafi movement that envisions spiritual revitalization of the
Islamic population and is detached of political ambitions.

Some of the scholars also point out that the recent trend in Ethiopia is that religion has rivaled
ethnicity as a focus of social identification and a site of political contestation (Dereje, 2012, p. 1909).
The changing attitude of the state towards Islam, however, has been a side issue among the scholarly
discussions. Østebø (2013, pp. 1-32) has attempted to document the changing attitude of the state
towards Islam in an extensive manner. Most of the new studies’ description and analysis, however,
either undermine the role of local reform movements or overstate their linkage to the global
phenomenon.

Beyond the scholarly circles, there is a growing perception that a radical Islamic ideology is
being imported to Ethiopia through Wahhabism. Since early 2000, many observers have felt that the
state should take measures to check the development of Wahhabism before it grows into a
destabilizing factor, nurturing destructive religious conflict in the region. Alem (2004), for example,
comments that “This destabilizing factor, which, next to oil, has become the major export item of
Saudi Arabia[,] is called Wahhabism.” He was not alone in his assessments as there are both foreign
and local observers who had similar concerns (Jon Abbink, 2007, p. 71; 2011, p. 264; Erlich, 2007,
pp. 31-33; Kabha & Erlich, 2006, pp. 234-238; Medhane, 2003).

Abbink (2014) also analyzed the 2011-2014 controversy between the Ethiopian government and
Muslim communities in light of identity politics and the secularism debate in Ethiopia. His study
provides insight into the nature of the controversy. None of these studies, however, investigated in
deepth how the state and the Muslim activists have used the historical repository of the nation’s
history to form and maintain certain kinds of collective memory that have utility for the present.
Thus, the contribution of the research is to fill this gap.

This research attempts to take into account local, regional and global significant factors that
shaped the state policy towards Islam. Particularly, I am interested in examining the process of
collective memory formation and the politics of Muslim identity. In this research, besides collective
memory, I apply superdiversity in a limited sense, to emphasize the role of information and
communication technology and the mobility of people in both constructing and sustaining collective
memories. More specifically, I look into how superdiversity plays a role in the formation, dissemination, and maintenance of collective memory. Superdiversity is a due recognition of “diversity within diversity.” It indeed recognizes mobility, complexity, and unpredictability. The change is a moving object rather than static (Blommaert, 2013, p. 5).

Unlike the previous studies of Ethiopian Islam, which either discounted greatly the impact of global connections or saw everything as a direct consequence of globalization, the study recognizes the dynamic relationship of the local with the global contexts. It duly recognizes the fact that Ethiopian Muslims connected to each other and the world at large are having an escalation of ethnic, social, cultural, and economic diversity. Despite the low coverage of the Internet and mobile technology, I view both as enabling infrastructures for the exchange of long-distance information and for developing and maintain trans-local ties. With the Internet and information technology, Ethiopian Muslims maintained virtual communities and networks to circulate, produce, and absorb information and to engage in an entirely new form of social interactions such as social media. The implication for the recognition of mobility and recent information technology is profound methodologically. With such recognition the developments within the Islamic communities becomes unpredictable and the way forward should include both online and offline ethnographic inspection. Thus, the study is open for a new image, metaphors, and notions.

The lack of in-depth study of the contemporary Islamic activism that constructs a usable past and its relation to the state warrants a study that documents the dynamic processes that have taken and are taking place in the relations between the religious politics of the state and Muslims.

In this regard, it is essential to describe the changes, analyze the factors that caused the developments, and look at the role and the reaction of the Muslim communities in relation to the changing state policy. Thus, the overarching research question of this study is what are the dynamic processes of collective memory formation and the politics of Muslim identity over the last 25 (1991-2015) years?

In light of the overarching research question, the research attempts to answer the following three interrelated sub-questions: How have the state and the Muslim activists rewritten history for the sake of advancing a usable collective memory? What are the dynamics of local, regional, and global factors that contributed towards the state’s policy change towards Islam over the last 25 (1991-2015) years? How do the state and the dissident voices mobilize support from the Muslim communities? In order to answer the three interrelated research sub-questions, I begin by presenting the main historical repository of the nation in terms of religious identity and the relationship between the state and the Muslim communities (Chapter Three). Once the historical repository of the nation is set, I present the respective narratives of the Muslim activists (Chapter Four) and the state (Chapter Five). In order to understand the present concerns of the state and the Muslim activists, I discuss the
changing policies of the state over the course of 25 years (1991-2015). Finally, I present the rhetoric of the dissident Muslims and the state to show how each of them have been mobilizing support to advance the formation of their respective collective memories.

1.6 Roadmap

The following few paragraphs provide a road map that unfolds in the remaining seven chapters. The second chapter provides both theories and methods. In the chapter, I introduce the major theories that served as heuristic tools for investigating, organizing, and explaining. Following that, I also at length discuss the research methodology and methods employed. The two significant theories applied in the research are superdiversity and collective memory. The notion of superdiversity emphasizes the dialectic relationship between the local and the global and the multiplication of diversity, given the nation’s connection to the global world and the use of Internet and mobile technologies in the information age.

Collective memories capture the subjective experience of Ethiopian Muslims, which is of course increasingly becoming a contested point, and its reconstruction is not devoid of current concerns. The use of informal institutions underlines the fact that studying the EPRDF’s policies requires more than parchment institutions, which limit analysis to written laws and regulations. The research uses an eclectic approach employing various approaches to collective memory since the emphasis of each is important for the research. The use of a presentist approach is to emphasize the inventive aspect of collective memory. The popular level approach of collective memory is to show the contest among competing reconstructions of the past, while the dynamic memory approach emphasizes the negotiation aspect of it given the available opportunities and constraints.

In the third chapter, I look into the nationhood of Ethiopia and the role of religious identities in the image production process of the nation. The overall objective is to provide background material in situating the EPRDF period. Its overall purpose is to depict the relation of Ethiopian states with Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia. In doing so, I revisit Ethiopian Christianity, given that the Christian kingdom had a symbiotic relationship with the EOTC. In this chapter, I suggest a normative criterion to define the Christian nation notion of Ethiopia. The chapter argues that Ethiopia has never been fundamentally a Christian nation. The review of the available history also examines both the formative periods and expansions of Ethiopian Christianity and Ethiopian Islam. It discusses the rivalry between the Ethiopian Christian kingdom and Ethiopian Muslim sultanates because of their economic interest. Given the role of the Prester John image in the Western imagination of Ethiopia, I look briefly at how the concept emerged and lasted. Finally, I conclude Chapter Three with the political marginalization of Muslims in Ethiopian history.
The fourth chapter looks into the collective memories of Ethiopian Muslims and their utility. To these ends, I look into the religious marginalization narratives of the Muslim activists with their narrative logic. In doing so, I look at the Muslim activists’ criticism towards mainstream Ethiopian history under three main emerging themes. To them, Ethiopian Muslims’ history is marginalized primarily because it was the history of Muslims, not Christians. The marginalization is, hence, because the historians were predominantly Christians, the perspectives were from Christians’ point of view, and the main sources were Christian sources. Following that, I argue that the counternarratives of the Muslim activists are also problematic and their approach has been a polemical one. I also underline that earning sympathy and supplying positive energy are the primary objectives that the Muslim activists pursued as they advanced the marginalization narratives.

The fifth chapter provides the EPRDF’s depictions of Ethiopian religious history. In order to do that, I discuss the formation of the EPRDF and the overarching political narrative under which its depiction of the Ethiopian religious is subsumed. In discussing the religious narrative, the dissident Muslim narratives are also given due attention. The EOTC’s narratives are included only when they clash with the Ethiopian Muslim activists’ narrative. The overall endeavor is to show inventions, contests, and negotiations in collective memories. Chapters Five to Seven investigate the EPRDF’s policy towards Islam. In doing so, the overall focus is on identifying the changes, causes, role, and reaction of the Muslim communities. Chapter Five covers the pre-2001 period, while Chapter Six discusses developments in the post-2001 period.

The pre-2001 period has two major sections, a pre-1995 stance and a post-1995 stance. The earlier period’s characterization is that of actively courting support from the Muslim communities, while the latter is the consideration of Islamic fundamentalism as an external threat from the neighboring countries. In order to show that the EPRDF courted support from the Muslim communities throughout the pre-2001 period, the pre-1991 stance of TPLF is given a central position, since TPLF is the core of the EPRDF and its formative image continued in this period. Following that, the Anwar Mosque violent incident and its aftermath are also given emphasis. Chapter Six expounds the notion that the EPRDF considered Islamic fundamentalism as a threat to Ethiopia from neighboring Somalia and Sudan. The EPRDF’s perception of the threat, however, did not extend to its own Muslim population. As a result, the chapter looks into Ethiopia’s foreign policy towards Somalia and Sudan.

Chapter Seven also examines the EPRDF’s policy towards Islam. Similar to the fifth chapter, the intent is to uncover the policy changes, the causes, the role and the reactions of the Muslim communities, except that the period under consideration is post-2001. In doing so, the chapter divides the post-2001 period into periods of cleansing the EIASC leadership from the influence of Wahhabism (2001-2005), the employment of interfaith dialogue for countering radicalization signs
(2006-2008), and domestication as a preemptive measure to contain Islamic radicalization (2009 to the present). In explaining each period, due emphasis is given to Ethiopia’s new role in the Global War on Terrorism, intra- and interreligious conflicts in Ethiopia, the narrowing of political space, Ethiopia’s relation to neighboring Somalia, and the role of the state media.

Chapter Eight presents the rhetoric of sensibility among Ethiopian Muslim activists and the EIASC. To this end, the chapter provides the background of the recent public activism and the competing alternate paradigms advanced. In unfolding the narratives, it also discusses what is at stake for the activists and the EIASC. In doing so, it looks into Wahhabism and the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam and how each defends itself as guidance of the true Islam. Prominent themes in the discussion are intolerance, radicalism, interference, and anti-Islamic policies of the state. The chapter also looks into the dynamics of the discrediting process. Chapter Nine provides concluding remarks for the research questions and suggestions for future research.
Chapter Two: Theories and Methods

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I set forth theories and methods that I employed for achieving the overall objective. As the introductory chapter (Chapter One) puts forth, the overarching aim of the research is to examine the dynamic processes of collective memory formation and the politics of Muslim identity over the last 25 (1991-2015) years. In the following sections, I look into various concepts in relation to my research. More specifically, religious policy, informal institutions, superdiversity, collective memories, the varied forms of social remembering, and the relationship between collective memory and identity formation are discussed.

Before outlining the theories used, I explain how the term policy is used in this research (2.2). In relation to the theories used in this research, I discuss informal institutions (2.3) to show their prevalence in Ethiopian politics. In the superdiversity section (2.4), I introduce the concept of the “diversification of diversity” (2.4.1) and the need to capture complexities (2.4.2). More specifically, I argue that the conditions of superdiversity are evident in relation to Muslim communities in Ethiopia. I also revisit collective memory (2.4) and the varied theories of remembering (2.5) to show that the imprint of the present influences the image construction and there are inventions, contests, and negotiations in the process. In the final section, I also attempt to link collective memory with memory activism and identity formation (2.6). Finally, the research methodology and method section (2.7) provides the details of the overall approach to the research design and the philosophical assumptions that underpin the research.

2.2 Religious Policy

Ulrich Willems, quoted in Martino (2015, p. 10), provides an insightful definition of religious policy as “all the political processes and decisions aimed at ruling the religious practices and the public states of religious symbols, practices, and religious communities.” To him, a religious policy is part of governing the public sphere where the religious also participate or are not excluded. Hallencreutz and Westerlund (1996, p. 2) define religious policy as “the position of the state in relation to the religious traditions within its sphere of jurisdiction” (Hallencreutz & Westerlund, 1996, p. 2). In this definition, the emphasis is on the role and the space of religion in forming the identity of the state, the regulation of the relations, and the plurality of religious communities. Unlike Willems, who defines religious policy in relation to the religious participation in the public sector, for Hallencreutz and Westerlund religious policy is a matter of the management of religious diversity.
In this research, the term “policy” refers to the way in which the EPRDF is disposed towards religions, more specifically towards Islam. In other words, religious policy is as one of the public policy arenas that falls under the jurisdiction of the state, where the state regulates the boundary within which the religious can act. The policy both enables and constrains religions. In dealing with religious policy, one notes that unlike other universal human rights, there are not any universally accepted legal standards that directly deal with the issue of the state-religion relationship and thus the specifics of the relation (Temperman, 2010, p. 3). The implication of its absence enables states to exercise control over it while setting legal standards, taking into account contextual factors. This poses a challenge in evaluating the religious policy of a given state. The fundamental question thus becomes against what normatively a religious policy is valued. If a national religious policy is the only criterion, the gauging of state’s action becomes the nation’s legal framework. At times, however, the legal framework of a nation lags behind the internationally accepted human rights standards.

In this research, the religious policy assessment follows the EPRDF’s legal framework as a point of departure. The primacy of internal criteria over international standards derives from the fact that even those who oppose the EPRDF’s approach towards Islam primarily employ the internal frameworks, although their understanding of them at times is at odds with the state. Because of this, due care will be provided as to how the legal frameworks are also interpreted. Thus, in this research, the practice of the state is evaluated against its own (lack of) enforcement of the nation’s constitutions and other relevant laws. The study also employs the Office of International Religious Freedom Report to evaluate religious freedom and equality. The inclusion of the latter is by taking into account the fact that it has become the standard compendium to measure the status of religious freedom worldwide. The quotation of these reports as normative also indicates the weight given to it by researchers, Muslim activists, and the state. The state reacts also whenever the office issues a negative report that endorses voices of dissent against the state.

2.3 Informal Institutions: Unwritten rules

Given that the main intent of the research is uncovering the state’s policy towards Islam, the institutional arrangements that structure the political life of the EPRDF are equally central focuses of this study. The institutional analysis, however, should not be limited to “parchment institutions,” which usually include more or less formal documents such as laws, regulations, constitutions, treaties, and so forth (Carey, 2000, p. 735). The understanding of informal institutions is diverse. Following Helmke and Levitsky (2004, p. 727), informal institutions are understood as “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels.”
Notwithstanding the value of the Ethiopian constitution in instilling laws and order, to reason only from the perspective of formal institutions is to disregard the realities on the ground. Inferring from various unconstitutional practices of the state, which remain unchecked, the EPRDF’s legal frameworks are part of the regime’s effort to achieve domestic and international legitimacy. The failures of formal institutions are also not the result of weak institutions or the administrative capacity of the ruling party but rather the operations of informal institutions. Thus, the legal frameworks are not necessarily signs of political commitment that strictly guide the actions of the state towards its citizens. At the present democratic stage, the legal framework’s value is at best symbolic or an envisioned distant future, not a present reality. The various unlawful actions of the state indicate that it did not yet start viewing the existing legal framework as a willfully self-imposed safeguard against going off track. In the EPRDF’s democratic practices, in cases where there seems the slightest trade-off is at stake, the prevailing informal institutions usually undermine the formal ones.

Abbink (2006, p. 174) remarks aptly about the significance of informal institutions in Ethiopian politics. He states, “… informal, behind-the-scenes politics is nothing surprising in the Ethiopian, or wider African, context and is perhaps inevitable in a contested and risky political arena.” This does not mean, however, that the prevailing informal institutions are innovations to Ethiopian politics since the EPRDF took power. As Young (2010, p. 196) argues, the history of Ethiopia witnessed powerful men, not laws that set the actual relationship. To him, the nation’s historical repository of the governance culture clearly indicates that the legal documents do not mainly determine the relationship between the citizens and the states. His comment perceptively puts in context not only the historic Ethiopian politics but also the present state. The adage that says, “You cannot plow the sky or accuse the king” is entrenched in the psyche of the society. If informally instituted practices that are prevalent in Ethiopia are ignored in policy analysis, it creates a significant void in understanding the realities on the ground.

In the EPRDF’s politics, there are clear shreds of evidence that power still rests in a handful of people. Tigray People Liberation Front’s (TPLF’s) central committee, one of the four ethnic-based parties that made the EPRDF, is hegemonic in directing the coalition from within and outside of formal state structures (Hearn, 2006 p. 57). Meles Zenawi, who became the chief ideologue of TPLF upon his appointment as the head of the party in 1983, was the strong man (Krylow, 1994, p. 233).

Upon the EPRDF’s formation, his leadership had also extended to the new alliance until his premature death in March 2012. His control of the EPRDF and TPLF had been continually on the rise, more so after 2001. The 2001 internal division within the central committee of TPLF and senior EPRDF officials also did not do much to reverse the power balance. Through the loss of a vote of confidence, the motion was on the verge of ousting him, which he eventually turned into his favor.
After that, not only did he successfully defeat his opponents within the EPRDF but also tactically purged the leadership on the ground of various charges including corruption. His opponents’ accusations related to the presumed lenient stance he had shown towards solving the Ethiopian-Eritrean war and his disregard for the political ideology of revolutionary democracy. His voice, as a continued legacy, is still quite detrimental in setting the discourse concerning the current protests of Ethiopian Muslims.

Besides the reality of powerful men in TPLF and the EPRDF, there are legitimate grounds that call for the inclusion of informal institutions. First, a formally established institution is not a logical outcome of an effective constraint on political behavior. Thus, if there are informal institutions, an assessment should include them. After all, much of the debate revolves not around the letters of the law but institutionalized practices that allegedly undermine it. In fact, besides subverting the constitutionally bestowed rights through informal institutions, there are also differences in interpretations of the provisions. In Abbink’s (2006, p. 174) terminology, the post-1991 political institution-building and public ethos of EPRDF efforts are “a high ingredient of rhetoric not backed by practice.” It does not escape observers that the state wraps legitimate questions into constitutional rhetoric while the very concern is their violation.

Second, as Aalen (2011, p. 48) argues, the situation in Ethiopia provides evidence that the unofficial and informal aspects of politics matter more than formal institutions. The evidence derives from the fact that the noninstitutionalized power politics of centralized party apparatus appear to have more influence upon political outcomes than the formal institutional framework and constitutional provisions. As a result, there were times in which a proclamation or a decision with a national level of consequence has passed overnight without due process of consultation. The failure of due process before passing an act was not because of an immediacy of the action but rather simply because it served the interests of those powerful men in the ruling party.

A corollary to the second reason but slightly different is that the usual complaints of Muslim activists are not about the fairness of constitutional provisions. Their argument pertaining to Islam is that the state pursues constraining religious policies towards Islam that are never explicit. If such a claim requires a fair hearing, a mere observation of the legal framework does not do justice to their concerns. By implication, a picture that emphasizes the formal institution but excludes from its purview informal institutions will be seriously flawed, inaccurate, and incomplete. Based on the above-mentioned grounds, the overall approach is to explore not only formal institutional setups but also informal institutions and rules of the games created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels.

In uncovering the informal institutions, highly visible (if infrequent) episodes of rule-breaking and sanctions serve as windows of opportunities to uncover the informal rules that are intended to be
communicated (Siavelis, 2006, p. 21). In this regard, the 1995 election of EIASC members and events that surrounded it are discussed at greater length. From the recent events, special attention is provided to events that surround the alleged Al-Ahbash training in Harar, the issue of Awolia Mission School, and the intermittent periodic demonstrations of various mosques of Addis Ababa. It has to be noted that related to the events various documentaries have been made, popular level articles have been written, evidence that purports state involvement in religious affairs has been produced, and the protesting arbitration committee of Muslims has issued letters. Muslim protesters with the intent of reaching the wider community make available documents online. These documents are thus not neutral records but rather are filled with ideologies the writers want to advance. In a way, they have also indicated the aspirations and the way facts are framed. As a result, the information secured was consulted from diverse sources and each source was evaluated against the agenda they advance.

2.4 Superdiversity

The recognition of the post-1990 period as an “era of superdiversity” is increasing (Cantle, 2013, p. 69; Fanshawe & Sriskandarajah, 2010, p. 5; Phillimore, 2015, p. 568). Inherent to the conception is an intensified phase of globalization and unprecedented scales of changes in political, economic, and social spheres derived from the ever-increasing interconnectedness of the world. Dynamism and complexity with its restructuring effects are also facets of globalization. The effect of globalization also multiplied with the roles of distinct but connected forces, the end of the Cold War, the wider availability of the Internet, and mobile technological infrastructures. The earlier changed patterns of human mobility while the latter ones radically affected information exchange and the modalities of networking (Blommaert, 2013, pp. 4-6; Ndhlovu, 2014, p. 12).

The changes also impacted the notions of personal and collective identity (Cantle, 2013, p. 69). In the era of globalization and superdiversity, the conception of identity is as dynamic. In Scholte’s (2005, p. 255) words, “…constructions of collective identities have tended to become more multi-dimensional, fluid and uncertain.” In the sociology of religion, the particular interaction with the global is glocalization. The term glocalization represents a hybrid, not that globalization has entirely replaced the particular local cultures. Globalization and glocalization, therefore, go hand in hand, producing both homogenization and heterogeneity (Roberts & Yamane, 2011, p. 390).

In the religious sphere, the interaction of the global with the local creates a condition of glocalization, the global expressed in the particular and the particularization of the global. The result of the interaction is religious plurality and diversification. With increasing diversity, the image of religion as the provider of societal cohesion, integration, and solidarity replaces the religious sphere as a site of contestation, difference, and conflict (Beyer, 2007, p. 99).
In the following sub-sections, I discuss the concept of superdiversity for my research (2.4.1). The overall objective of employing superdiversity as a heuristic tool is to show the fluidity and complexity of developments related to Ethiopian Islam given the increased mobility and the use of modern information and communication technology. The Internet is increasingly becoming a source of news, a means of mobilizing, and a stage for alternate discourse. I also argue that the primary conditions of superdiversity are evident in contemporary Ethiopia (2.4.2).

2.4.1 The “diversification of diversity”

Superdiversity is a term coined by Steve Vertovec in 2006 to capture the complexity and dynamism in the globalized era (Blommaert, 2013, p. 4; Ndlovu, 2014, p. 2; Stringer, 2014, p. 455). The introduction of the notion was within the context of Europe and more specifically in England. It was a call extended to social scientists and policy makers that the contemporary nature of diversity requires a distinct analytical tool or framework, which is better capable of describing and comprehending the diversification of diversity. The endeavor of the paradigm was to capture a transformative diversification of diversity in relation to the new immigration patterns (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1025).

Superdiversity paradigms are thus a critique of the simplistic notions of “multiculturalism” and “diversity” (Duarte & Gogolin, 2013, p. 3; Goebel, 2015, p. 8; Ndlovu, 2014, p. 11). Superdiversity is thus a recently invented critique of post-multiculturalism paradigms (Ndlovu, 2014, p. 11). The framework espouses both dynamism and complexity in relation to traditional social categories (Ndlovu, 2014, p. 13). As Guadeloupe (2015, pp. 22-23) aptly summarizes, superdiversity “is an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of diversities within an individual or groups without having recourse to differences… an inconsistent multiplicity, an understanding of a diverse reality without unifying these multiples in a collection of ones.”

The overall approach of superdiversity is thus to unpack what seems chaotic. As Blommaert (2013, p. 9) remarks, "Chaos is not an absence of order but a specific form of order, characterized intriguingly, by the increasing interaction, interdependence and hence coherence between different parts of a system." It is a methodological openness to accommodate people’s identity, and to accept allegiance does not mean to fall under a single identity marker (Fanshawe & Sriskandarajah, 2010, p. 5). This does not mean, however, that the earlier identity markers vanished and were replaced with something very new. Some scholars note such tendencies and caution against the use of superdiversity as potentially undermining the realities of group categories. The works of Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah (2010) might fall under categories that downplay various forms of traditional group identities. The use of superdiversity in a manner that erases the significance of traditional
group identities, however, falls into the trap of becoming politically naïve and a simple analytical tool devoid of its explanatory powers (Meer & Modood, 2015).

In line with Meer’s (2014) suggestion, in this research, superdiversity is understood as a tool that adds to and broadens (instead of eliminating) the role of standard group categories rather than a concept that discounts them. Blommaert (Blommaert, 2015, p. 84) in a similar line remarks about the added value of superdiversity by saying, “It explains exceptions better than the theory that it produced these exceptions.” In this research, the espousing of superdiversity is in an additive sense, a broadened way of looking into diversity. Blommaert and Backus (2013, p. 13) explain the paradigmatic implication of superdiversity:

*It forces us to see the new social environments in which we live as characterized by an extremely low degree of presupposability in terms of identities, patterns of social and cultural behavior, social and cultural structures, norms and expectation. People can no longer be straightforwardly associated with particular (national, ethnic sociocultural) groups and identities; their meaning-making practices can no longer be presumed to belong to particular languages and cultures – the empirical field has become extremely complex, and descriptive adequacy has become a challenge for the social sciences, as we know them.*

There is a consensus that the descriptive and analytical value of superdiversity lies beyond its background, which was studying the new patterns of emigration. The concept of superdiversity is a transdisciplinary approach, which can be applied across a range of disciplines including the humanities, the arts, social sciences, and natural sciences (Ndlovu, 2014, p. 13; Stringer, 2014, p. 457). Despite its potential, however, it is mainly the sociolinguistic field that has developed a significant corpus of empirical knowledge (Blommaert & Backus, 2013, pp. 13-14). Even in the sociolinguistic field, the margins or the periphery are largely excluded (Wang et al., 2014, p. 24). The implication of superdiversity as a framework to describe and comprehend religious identities waits for empirical evidence. The application of the theory in the Ethiopian context has two significances. It extends the empirical evidence in the area of religious identity and globalization into the margins.

### 2.4.2 The primary conditions of superdiversity

The primary conditions for the applications of the theory are the availability of certain infrastructures, the mobility of people, and wider availability of the Internet and mobile technology. At the expense of simplicity, the question is about the extent to which contemporary Ethiopians’ religious identity is affected by globalization.
Coincidentally, it was in 1991 that the nation opened itself up to the global world with the fall of the socialist Derg state. The immediate measures introduced a more liberal political atmosphere, which in turn facilitated the public expression of religion. The new direction paved ways for local Christian and Muslim organizations to reconnect to their coreligionists. The result was the proliferation of religious organizations or preachers. The intent of these organizations ranged from a reform agenda to expanding their faith globally. In the new connections and networks, Muslims and evangelicals had an advantage over the EOTC. The era also witnessed New Christian and Islamic NGOs emerging as well, several from abroad and with clear proselytizing aims (Jon Abbink, 2011, p. 261).

Since 1991, it could be said that Ethiopia is opening up to its own diversity and intensively reconnecting to the neighboring Middle East (Erlich, 2007, p. 1). The background is one of increasing globalization and political liberalization, which in Ethiopia has meant a devolution or decentralization of state power to the regional level and a measure of local autonomy. Globalization has intensified notably in the religious domain. Muslims in Ethiopia have reconnected with developments in Islam worldwide through travel, studying abroad, the activities of Islamic NGOs in Ethiopia, and international trade and business. As a result, reports of Islamic resurgence in Ethiopia are frequent (Jon Abbink, 2007, p. 73). Massive financial support from mostly informal, private circles in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States is funding Islamic revivalism and expansion in Ethiopia (Jon Abbink, 2007, p. 74). As the result of new connections and freedom of religion, there are religious reform movements that intend to fine-tune Ethiopian Islamic practice along lines they deem more “religiously correct.” To this end, Ethiopians have gone to study in the Middle East, established new schools and organizations, and hosted conferences (Feener, 2004, p. 231). In this line, Erlich (2007, p. 4) claims:

Saudi money is behind much of the current Islamic revival in Ethiopia, the construction of hundreds of new mosques and Quranic schools, the establishment of welfare associations and orphanages, the spread of the Arabic language and translated literature, the expansion of the hajj, the organization of conferences of preachers, the monthly subsidies for the newly converted, the spread of the contention that Muslims are already an overwhelming majority in the country, and more.

The measures taken towards religious liberalization also had a tremendous impact. As the quota for Hajj travelers increased, more Muslims had a chance to connect to their coreligionists. These travels have also created an opportunity for locals and foreigners. With the new connections, it was
possible to open new Islamic schools in which foreign Islamic teachers also participated. Many Ethiopian Muslims also had a chance to learn abroad. The liberalization also extended to private religious printing presses, which actively published translations of prominent personnel. The newly trained young scholars returning from Islamic universities abroad increasingly are replacing the older, traditional, uneducated sheiks. The young sheiks also bring substantial funding and build impressive mosques and Islamic schools (Jon Abbink, 2011, p. 261; Shinn, 2005, p. 97).

Besides Muslims receiving religious training abroad, many translations of Egyptian, Pakistani, Sudanese, South African books on Islam were published, thus showing the reconnection of Ethiopian Islam to global Islam (Jon Abbink, 2011, p. 264). This also led to the growing and persistent denigration of forms of local Islam and Sufism in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora also maintains a very strong presence in cyber-space with vibrant websites, blogs, and Internet radio networks, and it holds annual conventions and conferences to assess current social and political issues pertinent to Ethiopian Muslims (Derje, 2014, p. 40). More than anything, since the late 1990s religious news and messages have been issued increasingly via the new media (Jon Abbink, 2011, p. 263).

Part of the trend was the return of exiles from the neighboring countries. The Oromo Muslim returnees had been influenced by Wahhabi doctrines during their time abroad. During their stays in exile, they also had contacts with coreligionists in other countries who supported the establishment of mosques, schools, and associations. More specifically, the Ethiopian Muslim Youth Association was founded in the 1990s and linked with the Riyadh-based World Association of Muslim Youth ((WAMY). The Saudi-controlled World Muslim League’s International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) also owned the Awolia School and mission center since 1993. The two organizations have played a significant role in disseminating transnational Islamic identity (Council, 2013; Østebø, 2008, pp. 419-423). With the new global connection, Ethiopian Muslims’ responses to international events and issues in the Muslim world have also increased. Ethiopian Muslims made big demonstrations in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and the pulling down of the mosque at Ayodhya in India. The private Islamic media showed solidarity in the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the execution of Saddam Husain (A. Hussien, 2007, pp. 267-268).

2.5 Collective Memory

In the following sub-sections, I introduce the concept of collective memory. More specifically, I look briefly into how collective memory was discovered, how it remained without progress for decades, and its resurgence in the last four decades (2.5.1). After the brief historical review, I look into the essence of it, as a mode of remembering of the past greatly colored by our present concerns
(2.5.2). I also briefly explore the relationship between collective memory, individual memory, and knowing (2.5.3). Following that, I provide the fundamental premises of collective memory (2.5.4).

### 2.5.1 The resurgence of collective memory

In collective memory scholarship, many consider Maurice Halbwachs as the founding father (Beiner, 2007, p. 25; Hovannisian, 2011, p. 144; Schwartz, Fukuoka, & Takita-Ishii, 2008, p. 254). Before him, the experimental approach of Hermann Ebbinghaus dominated the scientific conception of memory, namely as an individualistic phenomenon in the field of psychology (Beiner, 2007, p. 24). The individualistic psychology conceived memory as universal and private. The universal focused on the physiological aspect that all humans share irrespective of their given social contexts. This line of research stripped away the social influences on cognition and behavior through methodological individualism, the individual being the research object from which memory-related data are collected. The conception of the content of memory, however, is construed as distinctively personal (Zerubavel, 1996, pp. 283-284).

One way of conceiving collective memory is thus as a criticism of a purely psychological approach that either individualizes or aggregates the phenomenon of memory (Olick, 1999, p. 341). Both the universalized physiological mechanism of remembering and its accompanying individualized content do not do justice to the whole phenomena of remembering. The dichotomization of memory as a universalized pattern that all humans share or as entirely private experiences has shortfalls. Within a universalized pattern and individualized personal experience lie memories that individuals share with some other people but not with all others. The sociology of memory, thus, by filling this very gap deals with the social aspects of the mental act of remembering. Inherent to it is the claim that social structures and institutions affect remembering and the whole act does not happen in a social vacuum (Zerubavel, 1996, pp. 283-284).

Collective memory studies, however, did not progress much before the 1980s despite such novel insights (Schwartz, et al., 2008, p. 254). The criticisms of contemporary figures such as Fredric Bartlet partly explain its failure to secure attention until the 1980s (Wertsch, 2008, p. 120). The 1980s and the three decades after that witnessed not only a resurgence in memory studies but also a proliferation of diverse scholarly interest within social science. The subject indeed has become a recurring field across disciplines of which anthropology, history, sociology, communication, cultural studies, and literature (Schudson, 1997, p. 1). Progressively, the study of collective memory has become a complex interdisciplinary space and has taken prominence in humanities and social sciences (Kansteiner, 2002, p. 180).

Kansteiner (2006, p. 180) suggested the convergence of social significance and intellectual curiosity as a major explanatory factor for the recent resurgence. From a social significance angle,
the decisive role of social memory in politics and society has increased greatly. Intellectually, collective memory has become a fruitful space in which scholars of postmodern orientations could demonstrate how multiple representations and power representation really work. A survey of the available collective memory research indicates that the importance of myths of origins and collective memory works mainly relates to Western cultures. Outside Western culture, much of the studies relate to Israel, and until now the study of Islam exhibits a dearth of the concept (Weismann, Mårtensson, & Sedgwick, 2014, p. 3). Through the employment of collective memory to an African context and Islam, then, this research contributes to filling a gap in the literature.

2.5.2 The past that never passed

The primary condition of collective memory is that it goes beyond an individual account and is subscribed to and shared by a group. This does not mean, however, that a mere collective recall of the past is the only condition. The recall should have also some historical and emotional relevance, connecting seemingly discrete events in a cause and effect manner. Thus, a shared account of the past becomes a collective memory when it invokes shared emotions and consciousness (Chirwa, 1997, p. 482). Griffin and Bollen (2009, p. 594) succinctly summarize the utility of collective memory, saying “underlying research in collective memory there is the idea that the past is never really ‘past’ — it persists into the present and presages the future.”

Collective memory is, therefore, an integration of various fragments of the past into a coherent common past that is collectively remembered by a particular community (Zerubavel, 1996, p. 194). Broadly, defined, collective memory is “how members of society remember and interpret events, how the meaning of the past is constructed, and how it is modified over time.” It refers to the dissemination of beliefs, feelings, moral judgments, and knowledge about the past, both for self-understanding and for winning power in an ever-changing reality (Litvak, 2009a, pp. 12-13). Such a conception of memory, however, poses a challenge since we all know that groups do not have a mind through which they think.

2.5.3 Collective memory, individual memory, and knowing

Collective memory studies face various conceptual difficulties, of which two are relevant to this study. First, how does collective memory relate to individual memory? Of course, groups do not have a collective mind. Always the individual mind does the actual task of remembering. The relationship between the two, therefore, is not a question of who does the recall. As a result, collective memory is not an antithesis to individual memory but rather a mode of individual memory conditioned on membership of a group. As an individual's memory enters into one’s own
understanding of who the individual is, so too the collective's memory enters into its self-understanding (Poole, 2008b, p. 274).

Second, the important question is how collective memory relates to knowing. The collective memory notion is one way of knowing the past. Collective memory, however, is not identical with the past the groups experienced. In fact, the power in memory-making (and -taking) stems not from a people’s ability to recount a linear list of historical events but rather from an ability to negotiate the past with the present, shaping group goals and demarcating membership to negotiate the past with the present (De Jong, 2009, p. 362). If collective memory implied the actual recollection or registrations of the past, we would not expect diametrically opposing narratives between the recall of communities that experienced similar events. Mere togetherness in the historical incidents does not invoke similar images. For example, those who feel injured and those who are victorious do not recall the incidents in question similarly (Takei, 1998, pp. 63-65). Collective memory is thus not a mere selective register of events.

2.5.4 Fundamental premises

The collective memory conception of social sciences hinges on three fundamental premises. First, the perceived past persists into the present and thus presages the future. Collective memory does not view the past with detachment as an event that passed. In collective memory, the past did not pass and it has some utility in relation to the present. Underlying research in collective memory is the idea that the past is never really “past” – it persists into the present and presages the future (Griffin & Bollen, 2009, p. 594). Second, memory, even if stored and recalled by the individual, does not happen without social context. In this line, Zerubavel (1996, pp. 296-297) argues that “remembering is more than just a personal act” and there is a need to “view memory as a social, intersubjective phenomenon.” The implication is that social structures and institutions shape and reinforce the whole act. Third, memory performs some form of culture work for the present communities. It is through memories that identities are advances and validated, the lines between enemies and friends are demarcated, and meaningful and coherent narratives are achieved (Griffin, 2004, p. 544).

A collective memory is what members of a mnemonic community commonly share. It is both impersonal and collective recollections. Collective recollection is not the arithmetic sum of personal recollections of its various members but rather an integration of various different personal pasts into a single common past those members of a community collectively remember. From a sociological perspective, social influences and/or constraints affect both the mechanism and the contents of our memory. The sociology of memory also emphasizes the impersonal aspect of recollection to assert that memories cannot be reduced to one’s personal experiences. It emphasizes the fact that much of
what we remember rests on mnemonic communities that we have become part of, whether that is our family, a religious community, or any other thought communities. Our memories are not necessarily also to be stored in the minds of individuals, but rather also in impersonal “sites “of memory such as transmitted oral traditions, texts, and other media (Zerubavel, 1996, pp. 289-293). In this research, I understood the collective memory of Ethiopian Muslims as a collaborative, collective project of interpreting a shared past to advance the present concerns. In the research I mainly attempt to explore how Ethiopian Muslim activists find identity and meaning in larger socio-historical events and processes.

In the collective memory section, I pointed out that the theory is increasingly being used in the last four decades. Despite the recent resurgence, however, the theory is not used much outside Western culture, and much of the studies relating to Israel are increasingly emerging. The concept has not been used much in relation to Islam. Given that the Ethiopian society’s nature is communal and the imprint of the past remains visible in the present, how the state and the Ethiopian Muslim activists use it remains unexplored. In this research, I intend to use the theory to indicate the act of rewriting Ethiopian history so that it fits one’s cause.

2.6 Theories of Social Remembering

In collective memory studies, based on the functions of memory, three broader categories have emerged. These theoretical categories differ as to who are the primary authors, the extent of control over memories, and the level of contestation they account for (Lamb, 2008, pp. 158-159; Misztal, 2003, pp. 56-73). The following sub-sections provide a brief preview of each. The following three sub-sections look into the presentist approach (2.6.1), the popular level approach (2.6.2), and the dynamic negotiation approach (2.6.3) to collective memory.

2.6.1 Presentist approach: Inventions

The presentist approach of collective memory is not monolithic. Inherent to all is the intertwining of the past with the present. In these conceptions, the emphasis is the instrumental value of collective memory. In this approach, memory is a socially constructed repository highly influenced by the needs of the present. In a way, there is a varying degree of manipulation of the past with the purpose of maintaining the power and status of the powerful. Part of the strategy to maintain a cohesive narrative is through the employment of censorship with the intent to enforce some memories. In this process, some memories are made to be forgotten, while through the celebration of some others their memory is better facilitated.

The method holds a top-down deterministic view of history and memory. Consequently, the scholarly approach exhibits a great deal of skepticism towards such top-down imposed memories.
the presentist approach, the overall purpose of collective memories is to establish authority, social control, and solidarity. The seminal edited work of Hobsbawn and Ranger (1992), under the title *Invention of tradition*, falls under this category. The approach uses rituals, periodic commemorative events, monuments, and heritages as an object of collective memory study (Britton, 2008, pp. 6-9). The creation and sustenance of endorsed views of the past are made possible through mass media, educational institutions, and ritual commemorations (Mrozowicki, 2011, p. 98). The approach has earned prestige among the scholarly communities, leading to a great deal of publications (Lia, 2013, p. 544).

The construing of collective memory as a strategic handmaiden of the present preoccupation, however, was not without criticism. Bauckham (2008, p. 316), for example, notes the approach’s tendency of absorbing individual memory into collective memory and absorbing memory into its present usefulness to the group as its weaknec. The approach’s cynical view of the past and its attitude towards non-elite members of the society is also another source of criticism. With a conception of the past as an endlessly pliable resource, the approach emphasizes the newness aspect. In doing so, however, it loses sight of the persistent characteristics of changes.

The negative view of non-elites of the society as naïve and docile is evident in the way in which it underestimates the capabilities of the ordinary citizens and members to resist and develop a counternarrative to top-down imposed narratives. More than anything, commitment to this method as a priori excludes the diachronic questions. It ignores the question that the past might inform also the present (Lamb, 2008, pp. 109-110). Notwithstanding the fruitful advances made through such perspectives, some researchers have also pointed that the actual past constrains endless creative imagination, and the environmental conditions and the existing mnemonic opportunity structures (the commemorative capacity, ascribed significance, and moral valence) also act as constraints, thereby effectively limiting the successfulness of memory initiatives (Armstrong & Crage, 2006, pp. 743-746; Ghoshal, 2013, pp. 330-331).

Given these criticisms, recent works on social memory have decreased in popularity. The new trend is a recognition of nuance and complexity between the past and present (Olick, 2013, p. 38). The newly emerging collective memory studies are increasingly framed within the framework of dynamic memory approach (Newman, 2012, p. 103). The presentist approaches of collective memory fit with the Ethiopian state’s narrative of religious marginalization that frames the past against the newly endowed freedom of religion and equality. This perspective clearly captures the narratives of the Ethiopian contemporary state. The perspective, however, fails to capture the narratives of Muslim activists on various grounds.

First, the collective memories entrepreneurs of the Muslim communities do not hold as such a formal power through which they could impose their views. Second, contemporary activists do not
hold power over the Muslim communities, and thus a top-down approach does not suit very well. Second, as Halbwachs and Coser noted (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992, p. 28), the presentist memory approach success is attributed to cases where the memories under consideration are the memories of unrelated groups. When this precondition is missing, then, the presentist approach does not do much justice to societies that have retained similarities over a long period of time (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992, p. 28). The direct lineage of the protesting Muslim communities’ members puts into question the legitimacy of the approach in unpacking the narratives. Third, the approach can do no justice to the intricate complexities that arise from the intertwined working of past and present.

### 2.6.2 Popular level approach: Contest

The alternative paradigm of collective memory development accrues to the popular group of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The main concerns of the group were the politics of cultural representation, the historical construction of subjectivists, and the interrelation between personal and collective modes of memory. The popular memory approach’s peculiarity is the framing of collective memory as conflictual discourse.

The alternate memories’ general characterization is that of hostility to “top-down” models of memory-as-social-control. It has emphasized the dynamic, fluid, unstable, and conflictual nature of memory, suggesting that coherence is impossible to impose upon social memory. It conceives of memory as a site of ideological contestation between opposing groups. Proponents argue that memory can constitute an ideological resource or cultural refuge for subordinated groups (Wood, 2013, p. 23).

In the popular memory approach, the overall attention is the local memories of common people rather than the elites. Thus, the method focuses on unpacking the counter-memories evident in songs and story that resist the dominant totalizing narratives of the elite. Even if the method duly recognizes the existence of counter-memories, the validity of counter-memories in shaping the society’s practice is greatly marginalized. It holds a dialectical relationship between popular and state-dominated narratives. It thus focuses on contestation and rules out the possibility that the politics of memory could be consensual (Lamb, 2008, p. 110). This is clear in the fact that the activists are employing not only historical narratives cherished by the state but also ones that radically depart at some points. Given that the popular level approach has strength in showing the contest in the collective memory, it is partially useful in this research.
2.6.3 Dynamic memory approach: Negotiations

In the dynamic memory approach, as the name itself implies, memory is a two-way construction. As a dynamic repository, the approach to the past is in a more nuanced way. Thus, collective memory is not a total invention of those in power or varying interpretation, one that power holders could effectively suppress. The method also incorporates conflict, contest, and controversy as its primary hallmarks. The method focuses on the dynamic process of adaptation and interpretation (Lamb, 2008). A dynamic memory approach allows that many groups use the past for instrumental reasons but denies the past as purely a construction and insists that it has an inherent continuity. It suggests a continuous process in which memories are shaped through a fluid negotiations between present needs and past realities (Newman, 2012, p. 103).

The approach’s essence is that social memory emerges through a process of negotiation between opposing interest groups. Importantly, this emphasizes the practical and conceptual limits upon the capacity of states, elites, or institutions to remake social memory in their interest, but it assumes that dominant forces often leave their imprint, such that memory is located “in the space between an imposed ideology and the possibility of an alternative way of understanding experience.”

Like popular memory, this approach emphasizes the active, contingent, and historically specific nature of the relationship between memory, power, and resistance. It recognizes that both for the governors and subordinates alike, the past can have a utility. The dynamic memory approach, however, takes more seriously the role of the subordinate groups since it rejects simple, functionalist explanations of social memory, arguing instead for a complex, multi-directional relationship between memory, identity, role, subjectivity, and collectivity (Wood, 2013, p. 24). I employ mostly this memory approach because it holds the possibility that the collective memory could be both consensual as well as conflictual, and it conceives of memory as developing through the process of negotiation.

2.7 Collective Memory, Activism, and Identity

In sociological studies, memory’s role is as a key locus of identity formation. Memory, as people’s representations of the past, serves as a window to their identity (Conway, 2003, p. 310). According to Conway, the sociological theorizing of identity implies seven interrelated crucial propositions. First, memory is a central component of identity and biography. Second, identity and memory are socially constructed and reconstructed. Third, identity arises from self-other interaction. Fourth, the self emerges over time and place. Fifth, narratives or stories carry memories forward from one historical period to another, thus reproducing society’s ties to the past. Sixth, stories define our present identities. Seventh, identity, in turn, defines what is remembered and what is forgotten about the past (Conway, 2003, p. 312).
Collective memory solidifies personal, group, and national identities; sanctions complaints and encourages intergroup hostilities; levies obligations and debts on the living; and exacerbates or offers relief from past traumas. Memory put succinctly is thought to matter, and a large body of interdisciplinary research demonstrates that remembered past does, in fact, affect people’s attitudes and actions across a variety of domains, sometimes powerfully so (Griffin & Bollen, 2009, p. 594).

Collective memory is not merely a collection of claims about the past but also a source of group identity. It acts as the group’s existence in the past, present, and future. It is through the narrative’s struggle and achievement, victory, and defeat that members construct their present identity. Thus, unlike history that narrates in the third person, the narrative of collective memory is in the first person character. By analogy, as individual memory designates one’s own story or the story of the other, a collective memory similarly implies one’s group story or the story of the other groups. Inherent to individual or group memory lies identity formed by the content of the memory (Poole, 2008a, pp. 158-159).

Clearly, the role of memory is epistemological, as it supplies information about the past. It is with the help of memory that we easily make sense of things that we previously witnessed and learned. Beyond epistemology, the role of memory is normative, since memory effectively captures the obligations and responsibilities that we have acquired that continue to impact our present behaviors (Poole, 2008a, p. 152). Collective memory is thus a powerful cultural resource. It is a means by which we build communities with common goals that actively engage in shaping public opinion and alter institutional action. The implication is that that collective memory is an effective political and moral tool. In such instances, one should not underestimate the centrality of social movements in the construction of collective memories. In the works of literature of collective memory, the claim makers are called “reputational entrepreneurs,” “memory entrepreneurs,” and “memory activists.” In the claim making, the activists’ role is primarily to negotiate for their causes. Their effort is to negotiate predefined meanings to their end, surpass the preexisting institutional constraints, and assert their narratives against other memory activists with the hope of shaping how people remember (Kubal & Becerra, 2014, p. 865).

Bar-Tal and Salomon (2006, pp. 24-25) have suggested four emerging themes in the collective narrative that have a significant bearing on both the perception of the conflict and its management. First, collective memory serves as a justification of the whole process starting from its outbreak to various courses of development. In the retelling, it defends the conflicting goals by stressing how failure endangers the very existence of the group. It also paints the goals of the other as unjustified and unreasonable. Second, the narrative presents a positive image of one's group. The contents of the narrative can pertain to a variety of positive acts, traits, values, or skills that characterize the society.
As Bar-Tal remarks, groups involved in intractable conflicts continually engage in self-serving behaviors. They intensively justify, praise, and glorify themselves.

Third, the narrative of collective memory delegitimizes the opponent. Part of such a strategy is to present the other as the cause of the conflict and the failure to resolve it. The narrative focuses on the violence, atrocities, cruelty, lack of concern for human life, and viciousness on the other side. It describes the adversary's inhuman and immoral behavior and presents it as intransigent, irrational, far-reaching, and irreconcilable. Fourth, the narrative of collective memory presents one's group as being a victim of the opponent. This view is formed over a long period of violence because of society's suffering and losses. On the one hand, the narrative elevates the injustice and atrocities inflicted by the adversaries. On the other hand, in relation to oneself, the overall emphasis becomes that of moderation and reasonableness, allowing members to present themselves as victims. The construing of oneself as a victim is not without effect. The other becomes the adversary that does not hold the moral value.

2.8 Research Methodology and Design

This section provides the methodology of my research and its design. To this end, first, I explain the research philosophy that guided my research (2.8.1). In the research field section (2.8.2), I explain at length the nature of the field. More specifically, I argue how inaccurate the representation would be if the online contexts were either ignored or trivialized. The argument of the field research is that the online context is crucial in understanding the nature of contemporary Islamic activism in Ethiopia and the way it interacts with the state. In the remaining sections, I explain the research subjects’ composition and representations (2.8.3). The data collection procedures followed (2.8.4), the formal and informal policy data sources, and the means of identifying the informal policies (2.8.5) are also given due attention. The nature of online data sources (2.8.6), the so-called conspiracy documents that circulated among the Muslim communities (2.8.7), and the state media as a data source (2.8.8) are also discussed. In the final section (2.8.9), I also set forth the periodization scheme of the two and half decades of Ethiopian government policy.

2.8.1 Research philosophy

The underpinning philosophical assumption of the research methodology is that of critical realism. A critical realist epistemology amalgamates the strengths of positivism and the postmodern hermeneutical approach of skepticism. The method does not share the purely objective referential claim of positivism. It also distances itself from the claim of radical postmodernism that denies any valid referential connections between our languages and the phenomenon under study. From positivism, the philosophical approach affirms the possibility of making valid referential claims
between our description and reality, while at the same time denying a pure objectivity free from any bias. The philosophy thus acknowledges that our knowledge is both fallible and theory-laden. The method also does not overstate its capacity in describing its research objects the way they are, and at the same time, it protects itself from the radical postmodernist approach that precludes one from making any kind of meaningful referential claim.

The choice of critical realism derives from its methodological implication. The philosophical approach espouses and accommodates methodological pluralism. Within methodological pluralism, it holds deduction, induction, abduction, and retroduction as legitimate modes of scientific inferences (Danermark, 2002, pp. 79-96; Iosifides, 2013, pp. 133-143). In the deductive approach, the method accommodates the use of established theories and follows analytical reasoning. In doing so, however, I caution myself not to begin with false premises and valid inferences, which still result in a true conclusion. In this line, this research uses collective memory and superdiversity as its main descriptive and analytical frameworks. The use of this theory, however, is not to test their validity in the empirical world like most of the deductive studies. My use of these theories is that of a heuristic tool for explanatory purposes.

The philosophy is also open to induction, to generalize from few and limited observations. The generalization, however, is not a representative generalization of the positivist approach but rather an evidential conjectural approach of the case method. According to Blommaert and Dong (2010, pp. 12-13), a method is “evidential” when it uses empirical facts (inductions) from the field as a point of departure. It is also conjectural because the method does espouse the conclusion to be this-or-that rather than only this. Here also another caution is necessary: The danger is the opposite of deduction, the possibility of arriving at wrong conclusions even if one begins from true premises. This research also uses empirical data collected from the field to theorize about the overall context. In this research, I employ the collected empirical data, from which I will find out about the state’s approach to Islam.

The approach also permits abduction as an inference mechanism. Abduction allows re-description and reconstruction of the phenomenon of interest from a different interpretive framework than the previous studies used. The changing of the interpretive framework is to gain different insights. Thus, the change in an interpretive framework provides not only an additive (quantitative increase) in knowledge but is also qualitatively different from the previous studies. The use of abduction in research has profound implications for defining data sources. This line of reasoning permits a creative use of secondary literature in order to arrive at a different conclusion mainly through the process of re-description and reconstruction. As a result, this research’s interaction with previous available works of research was not limited to mere critical dialogue but also used their data
to arrive at novel conclusions. Such conclusions are possible because of the new interpretative framework the research uses.

The philosophy also espouses retroduction. Inherent to the retroduction process is asking fundamental questions about the observed facts with the hope of uncovering the underlying basic structures and conditions to produce the observed actions and relationships. Thus, this research intent is not only to describe but also to ask fundamental questions that would enable the identification of changes from state policy, factors purporting the change, the role, and the reaction of the Muslim communities. These four broader research questions serve as the fundamental research questions asked in order to uncover the social reality that consists of internally related structures.

2.8.2 Research field

Studies that collect field data usually delineate their data source based on the research subjects’ geographic locations. In my research, the geographic delimitation of the research subjects is not that straightforward. Partly because alongside the physical protest spaces, such as mosques and AMMS, the Internet is no less a primary space in which the dissidents actively participate to voice their concerns.

The active participation of members of the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora through the medium of the Internet and mobile technology thus somehow rendered the traditional physical space delimitation inadequate in understanding the contemporary Islamic activism in Ethiopia and its relation with the state. The other factor that increased the complexity is some of the dissidents travel from the nearby cities and regions to participate in the public demonstrations conducted in Addis Ababa. Thus, the dissent that I observe in Addis Ababa includes others who are also outside Addis Ababa. Related to the physical places, mosques and AMMS compounds were the primary sites in which the public demonstrations were conducted.

It is within this complex context that I chose Addis Ababa as a primary physical site for research observation and interviews. As I already stated, the physical public demonstrations are organized via the Internet, I have also included social media, websites, and online Islamic radio outlets as online research sites. In order to appreciate the role of social media, I note that it served as a substitute to organize the Muslim community. As an example, hereunder I explain the launching ceremony of a book by one of the dissident committee members, Ahmedin Jebel. His new book title is 3†爱尔兰’s 新 4†爱尔兰的 5†爱尔兰的活动 (ጤን እና ዱንት) (The three emperors and Ethiopian Muslims (Struggle and martyrdom)).

The advertisement for the book launch program reads, “Ahmedin Jebel’s book, The three emperors and Ethiopian Muslims (Struggle and martyrdom), will be launched on March 26, 2016 in the Facebook Online Hall.” The inauguration ceremony looks like a typical book launching
ceremony except that the program coordinators, the author, and the invited guests were not physically present. In the new online arrangement, the venue was Facebook Hall, the time was from 8:30 PM to 11 PM, and the stage was a recording aired in which the author – in prison – along with prominent Islamic teachers and his close friends delivered messages. The audiences also changed their profile pictures to show the cover page of the book. I closely monitored Muslim activists’ social media and webs.

One might question the choice of Addis Ababa as a research site, given that Muslims account for not more than 15% of the city’s population. The decision hinged, among other factors, on the fact that the city has played a strategic role in relation to the contemporary Muslims’ dissent. From the perspectives of contemporary activists, it is in Addis Ababa that the protest movement’s active participants reside. Even those that represented the regions in the dissent have come to Addis Ababa to join the leadership team. Unlike the previous episodic clashes between Christian and Muslims, which were outside of Addis Ababa, the present protracted protest of Muslims traces its genesis as well as its continued leadership to those residing in the capital city.

The state’s legal prosecution against the dissident Muslim leaders also took place in the capital city, justifying the selection of the city as a physical space. One of the three questions of the dissident Muslims relates to Awolia Muslim Mission School (AMMS), located in the city. From the perspective of the EIASC also, much of the activities that have national implications are coordinated through the federal national office seated in Addis Ababa. The Oromia EIASC, which has the largest absolute number of Muslim adherents, also has its office here. The Ministry of Federal Affairs (MoFA), which handles religious adherents, is also situated in the capital city.

The offline gathering of data in the field was twice per year, from December to March and from June to September in 2013, 2014, and 2015. Unlike the offline data, the online data gathering continued between 2013 and 2015. Due to my prior personal interest in relation to Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia, I was also following developments closely in Ethiopia prior to this study. The online and offline data that I collected prior to this research were thus also helpful. I also visited Woldia City and interviewed individuals that supported the movement. I traveled to Woldia city because the city is one of the strong bases from which the dissidents operate, and it has an Islamic school that has operated for more than 30 years.

Similar to AMMS, the Selam School’s operation became controversial as the EIASC dismantled the previous leadership and replaced it with new ones. Due to my personal connections, I was able to interview the director of the school and a religious-related courses teacher in it. Related to the offline data gathering, mosques, the federal state courts in which the cases of the defendants were seen, the Ethiopian Interreligious Council (EIRC), MoFA, the EIASC, and the ordinary working spaces of Muslims were particularly important. The primary physical spaces for observations were mosques
and the state courtrooms in which the dissidents’ cases were seen. The other spaces were where I conducted my interviews and discussions.

Observing the public dissent in these two spaces was made easy because dates are usually announced through social media, more specifically Facebook. In accordance with the dates announced in the social media, I made various observations of the mass protests, which were around the two prominent mosques located in Addis Ababa. Mostly, the protest movement was at the Anwar Mosque and Beni Mosque, which are in Merakato and Piasa, respectively. After the protests, each Friday witnessed a presence of large police forces around these two mosques, especially the Anwar Mosque. The protests usually ended peacefully.

In one instance where I was observing the protest movement, the incident changed into a violent clash between the police and the protesters. In such instances, the police indiscriminately beat whoever was around. Since the protest was spontaneous, I ran fast with the crowd in order to escape the brutal measures of law enforcement agents. I was among the lucky ones. I have also attended court proceedings, which were open to the public. In fact, the later proceedings were not open to the public. Even in cases where courts were not open to the public, a handful of youths usually appeared in front of the courtroom to show solidarity to their movement leaders and wave their hands as they entered. The court proceedings exhibit extraordinary cautions. The security procedure prohibits carrying any kind of electronic material that is capable of recording the proceedings. I was even more surprised to discover that not only recording instruments but also pens and empty papers were banned from the courtroom. Despite these measures, however, details leak, both photographs and voice recordings.

Quite surprisingly, the securitization was not only from the state side. Those who come to attend the court also investigate new faces. Especially in the initial days, it was not unusual that some asked me who I was and for what purpose I was there. Their usual expectations were that I was a private journalist. Learning that I am a researcher, however, a few of them asked for my phone number, which I graciously provided. None of them, however, called back, probably on the ground of being suspicious that I might be a state agent. In cases where I have called them, they have pretended that I am calling to the wrong number. I also witnessed that they isolated some individuals from the group, showing them signs that no one should talk to them. Later, I learned that these singled out individuals were perceived as agents of the state and their presence was believed to be in order to infiltrate among them in order to collect data about the protest movement. The attendee of the court would show non-verbal signs to each other that prohibits discussion of anything significant whenever they suspect that the new face is a state agent. Sometimes social media also post some individuals’ pictures, implicating them as state agents, to warn the Muslim communities and to discredit their status.
2.8.3 Research subjects

Considering that the research issue is delicate, it demanded an approach of sensitivity and caution. To this end, due care was exercised to be inclusive and to fairly represent diverse opinions. The overall approach was purposive sampling. Overall, the interviewees numbered 55, of which 27 were Muslims, and the remaining 28 were Christians. From the 28 Christians, 14 of them belong to the EOTC, 13 to Evangelicals, and only one is Catholic. In both cases, Christians and Muslims, the research subjects represented both laypersons and religious clerics. The representation of the former is greater than the latter.

The Muslim interviewees were from different occupations. Among the interviewees are sheikhs at mosques, previous students of Islamic schools, university students, university lecturers, self-employed traders, employees of the government and of private companies, members of the EIASC, and members of Ethiopian Interreligious Councils. In terms of education, the interviewee range is from a high school graduate to a graduate level of education. With the exception of one who studied in Saudi Arabia, the Islamic education of the clerics and those who teach at Islamic schools consisted of training in Ethiopia and through distance education, particularly from Sudan. Some of the respondents were direct victims of the state – some directly since they were beaten and imprisoned for a short time, usually a day or two, as they were found participating in public demonstrations. The experience of the others is indirectly, since either their relatives or close friends were beaten and imprisoned by the police force.

In order to shed light on the context, let me briefly introduce two of my interviewees. One of the interviewees was a young imam, who is in his early 20s and used to lead prayer in the mosque and teach in a rural madrasah. The madrasah (the religious school) in which he used to teach was closed due to loss of financial support both for the students and for the schoolteachers. He also failed to maintain his position as an imam of a mosque on the charge that he follows the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. His present occupation, which he detests, became retailing of ready-made clothes. He is very unhappy with his occupation and very angry at EIASC members and the state. Despite his age, however, the respect he earned among Muslims was evident in the fact that a day after our interview he was about to ask for the hand of a respected Muslim daughter in marriage. Such a task is usually allotted to mature people, usually above 40 and/or a respected religious leader.

The other interviewee is in his early 30s. He is a businessperson who also frequently travels to China and Bangkok. He intimately knew the protest leaders. In relation to the Muslims dissent, his brother is now in prison. He supports the cause of him and the other dissidents but shies away from direct activism on the fear that it will have a negative consequence in relation to the government. He
supports the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam but openly confesses that he is weak to follow its precepts. He also loves rap music, and Tupac Shakur is his favorite.

The activists in the Muslim communities, the EIASC members, and the state were the primary actors relevant to the research. In the protest movement, Ethiopian Muslim activists played a central role. They were agents of signification – in other words, the role of the activists was to generate and explain their own narratives. Besides constructing narratives, the activists also engaged in interpreting and reinterpreting the accounts of the state, EISC, and significant others. In this regard, I gave special attention also to the elected committee members of dissident Muslims. The voices of the elected committee were crucial, given that the state labeled it as “terrorists” and called the dissidents “Our Amir.”

Interviewing the committee members was impossible since they were in detention and any association with them creates a suspicion from the state. Fortunately, however, their views were very clear, as they are expressed via a month-long, 30 minutes per day radio program of Dimitsachin Yisema. The leaders also run a Dimitsachin Yisema Facebook page, release statements, appear on various online Islamic radio stations, and publish booklets that document their concerns and the processes they have undergone. I also looked at some of their preaching videos in order to understand their concerns and their messages to the Muslim communities. In addition to the activist leaders and dissidents, the perspective of the EIASC, MoFA, and Christians from different traditions were no less important. I also took into account the perspectives of political entrepreneurs besides the state.

In the discourse, the EIASC has also a prominent role. It is this very institution that the Muslim protesters accused of conspiring with the state. The EIASC also accuses the activists of being Wahhabi, a pejorative term that connotes religious radicalism and tolerance as well as a nefarious pecuniary interest. For the protesting activists, the EIASC embodies and reflects the wishes of the state. The Islamic religious institution has become the state’s contrivance for the unfair treatment of the Muslim population it seeks to represent. In contrast to the dissident Muslims, the state considers the EIASC as the only legitimate Muslim institution whose installed leaders are the result of a nationwide democratic election of the communities. Thus, institutionally the EIASC has the recognition of the state as the final authority to voice the concerns of its Muslim population. Anything not endorsed by the EIASC is treated with suspicion. As a result, a recommendation letter from the EIASC in relation to Islamic matters has become a necessity in state-related activities such as the registration of a national or international Islamic charity. I also observed and talked with some of the Muslims who came to the office in relation to the Hajj to Mecca.

Given that Muslims are the neighbors of Christians, other religions (mainly Christianity) are also important for the study. The collection of data from Ethiopian Christians, both evangelicals and
Orthodox adherents, happened in ordinary conversations. A collection of data from Christians was not that difficult even if I disclosed myself as a researcher. Christians were open to sharing their experiences and anecdotal evidence. In most of the cases they were not willing to be on the record for fear that their words might be used against them. As a result, I took field notes immediately after we finished our discussions.

2.8.4 Data collection procedures

In general, I collected most of the data of the activists’ leaders from their own blogs, preaching, and publications in addition to social media. I did not attempt to interview them on three grounds. First, their stances on the state’s actions, even if sporadic, are available through their own previous publications and speeches. Second, the members provided various announcements related to the protests and made clear their voices through private Islamic and secular newspapers and magazines. They were also interviewed frequently on international radio and TV, more specifically ESAT and VOA. Thirdly, the state looks at any attempt to contact the leaders with suspicion; as a result, I did not want to attract unnecessary attention. Speaking to the activists and observing them, however, is not that difficult.

I primarily collected data through in-depth interviews with Muslims living in Addis Ababa. Very few of the respondents were willing to be on the record. In a few of the attempts, despite the fact that I was endorsed by their own friends, some Muslims were either very unwilling to give any information or otherwise provided me very little. Two instances shed light on such contexts. One of the cases related to a young imam in one of the mosques in Addis Ababa. I met the imam through a Christian friend who has a Muslim friend, thus our association is the third degree.

The imam was not only happy to receive me but also willing to discuss Islamic issues, thinking that I was a Christian seeker. Once he knew that I was a researcher and my questions related to the state and the EIASC, however, he refused to speak. He overtly expressed the fear that his statement could be used against him and trusting even his brother on the matter is not wise. The other incident happened outside Addis Ababa. In this case, I went with a Muslim friend of mine who was well known to the interviewee since my friend’s father was also the interviewee’s colleague. The potential interviewee was over 60 and one of the founders of an Islamic school that provides not only religious training but also secular education up to high school. Nevertheless, he refused to comment on the contemporary issues, remarking that he had nothing to do with it and that it was too political.

After the first few interviews, I realized that immediately embarking on recording creates some sort of tension as well as the loss of crucial information. In the field experience, I also found out that people shy away from voice recording by a stranger. Relevant information usually gushed out once the recorder was off. Thus, the recording process of the interviews took a three-stage approach and
was always supplemented with field notes. First, through personal networks of friendship I contacted Muslims that are supporters of the dissent. Then, I introduced myself as a researcher and explained the research project being undertaken. At this moment in time, I did not ask questions but developed a rapport. Our initial meetings were usually limited to personal matters, and most of the questions asked were by them. Questions that I faced frequently were my religious background and why I am interested in the issue as non-Muslim. I honestly provided answers. As the relationship developed further, I posed the research questions but without recording them. I took notes, however, of crucial terms that surfaced in the discussion. It was only at least after two meetings that I asked the willingness of the person to be on record, and the answers in most cases were positive. Part of the trust derived from the fact that I am a student of a European university, thus they thought that there is both academic integrity and independence in analyzing the data without undue interference of the state.

In the process of interviewing, I realized that the data on the record is not as rich as the data after I switched it off since there was a pervasive fear that it might slip into the hands of the state and be used against them. Thus, my notes played a crucial role in the research. Contrary to my experience with the ordinary Muslims, however, employees of the office of the EIASC, the Ethiopian Interreligious Council, and MoFA took comfort in my letter of recommendation from an Ethiopian state university. Switching off the record did not end the discussion. Thus, I had additional time to have follow-ups in ordinary conversation. The research report disguised all the interviewees due to the sensitivity of the data. The interviewing guide comprises a series of four research objectives. The questions I posed were similar even though their order varied. This was to ensure consistency and reliability. This does not mean that additional questions, which help to extract more information and explore areas in detail, were not employed.

Besides pre-planned formal interviews, I also used informal interviews in a naturalistic setting. Whenever the topic of interest arose in ordinary conversation, I directed it in the way that the four research questions would surface. In those cases, I also took a short field note. What followed the field note was immediate writing so that the content and the context of the data did not fade away from memory. In cases of recorded interviews, I listened repeatedly to the contents, including intonations, in order to identify emerging major themes. Contrary to my expectations, I found also that being a Christian and a researcher of Islam helped my cause more than hindering it.

Many Muslims thought that my willingness to do research in the area indicated some sort of openness. This does not mean there were no disadvantages. The main disadvantages were that some of the interviewees conceived me as “the other” that they should convince for their cause. Thus, their approach tended to be defensive in its orientation. In the process of data collection, I learned that the interviewees did not have much to offer on an individual level of marginalization stories. The
exception is that whenever they receive money through banking transfer a strict scrutiny of their identity is done. What respondents generally have is a general impression of the historic and the contemporary marginalization of Islam. The only exceptions that repeatedly surfaced related to educational institutions where performing of Salat and the wearing of niqāb are prohibited.

2.8.5 Formal and informal policies

In order to identify the formal policies of the state, I took into account various sources of the state. The study revisited constitutional provisions, religious-related proclamations, and various directives that have implications. I also looked at the archives of the EPRDF’s analytical magazine called Addis Raeiy (the translation means new vision). The publication of the magazine is once every two months. It is also widely read among EPRDF members. In fact, this magazine is one of the means through which periodic issues and the response of the party are disseminated to its members. In a way, the magazine serves as a platform where a consensus near to homogeneity is made possible among its members. As a result, I used the magazine as an information source.

In order to identify rules and regulations that structure and constrain the opportunities of Ethiopian Muslims, I consulted various sources that augment each other. I talked to Muslims, followed online Islamic radio outlets of the Ethiopian Diaspora, studied various statements issued by international human rights-related organizations, and critically read reflective essays written in private newspapers and magazines. These writings of the activists and international observers also provided insights to identify points of contention between the state and the Muslim society. I also contrasted the informal institutions of the states with the existing legal system whose framework guarantees both the equality of all religions before the law and basic personal rights. As one could presume, the most daunting task of the research was the identification and analysis of informal institutions. Part of the difficulty is inherent to the nature of informal institutions, namely the fact that informal institutions by their very nature are not codified in the law but are operative in the day-to-day activities.

Following Brinks’ suggestions (2006, pp. 203-205), I asked a series of five interrelated questions to determine whether the regularity observed constitutes informal institutions and is not attributable to a formal institution, structural conditions, or other identifiable features of the socio-political landscape. Hereunder I explain the procedure employed for identification of these informal institutions.

In this research, the test for the existence of informal institutions begins with the charges of the Muslim communities ascribing certain outcomes to unwritten policy towards Islam. The second criterion is to describe certain behavior in terms of an enforceable rule of conduct. Thus, I evaluated the ascribed outcome as a prescribed external sanction of the state upon the Muslim communities.
Here, I took into consideration the expectations of the Muslim communities in relation to certain acts. Third, I asked whether there is any evidence that indicates that the violation of informal rules results in enforcement by the state or not. To identify the enforcement, I looked at whether there is a lack of enforcement of formal rules in relation to the informal rules. I also further asked about the punishment of behaviors that are inconsistent with the presumed informal institutions. In relation to this, the actions of the policy and the observation of the court were important. Fourthly, the study observed if negative sanctions followed those who acted under the aegis of the informal rules but against the formal rules. In cases where there is a claim that breaking of formal law was not punished by official enforcements, I attempted to assert that it was not because of a difficulty of detection. Fifthly, I asked whether the relevant actors know the rules, anticipate consequences, and guide their conduct. Here, I looked for illegal conduct from the formal enforcement agents committed publicly, without much attempt at hiding it.

The overall objective of the research is not only about discovering the state policy towards Muslims but also the underlying causes. In doing so, a logical link will be made between seemingly isolated events, and it will provide an overall sense within the larger national, regional, and global framework. In such analysis, the voices of various analysts come in handy. Thus, the study takes into account various competing scholarly narratives and evaluates their heuristic value in making sense of the empirical facts at hand. Besides the scholarly views, I also consider the narratives of the EPRDF, the opposition political entrepreneurs, Christians, and Muslim protest activists, general Muslims, and non-Muslims. As the third objective, I attempt to describe the reaction of Muslims towards such changing policies of the state. Observing the role of Muslims is essential because they were not merely passive in the process of change. Reaction refers more to the result of the complex dynamic between the state and Muslims rather than the initiation of the change always being from one side. In this regard, I looked at the role of the Muslim communities.

2.8.6 Online data sources

The conducting of the overall study was within an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion. The context was one in which the interaction of the state with religious-related information was kept secret. Such an information gap, however, was largely surmountable with the massive data available in the online sources. The suppression of data availability, in fact, ironically increased the availability of data. In this regard, the Internet has become a depository. In fact, I secured much of the data from online sources. The online radio spots that aired are available for download, and follow-up of social media pages was possible. Rather than taking at face value the online information, I frequently checked the online data with relevant institutions and individuals to ascertain its reliability.
The availability of the data online emanated from facts on the ground. First, the existing press regulation generally considers that religious-related kinds of activism could easily be classified by the state as illegal. Thus, the Internet became a public space where freedom of expression is possible. It is there that counter-memories of dissent have their expression. In other words, the Internet became a means of circumventing the press laws that stifle dissenting voices. Second, the state mainly controls the media and at times confiscates their publication on the ground that it disrupts the peace of the society. It even jams international media outlets in an effort to block alternate narratives. More specifically, even though the state denies it, the Amharic transmission of Voice of America (VOA) and the Germany’s Radio Deutsche Welle has accused the Ethiopian state of jamming these radio stations. Their accusation makes sense, given that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi equated the VOA’s Amharic service to the Rwandan radio station, which incited hatred and violence.

The state-controlled radio and TV has continued to label alternate sources that are critical of the state as organizations that are engaged in destabilizing propaganda. This by itself has created a need to correct opinions voiced in the state media. In order to do so, logic required presenting a response to various allegations and voicing a contrary perspective on the matter. Third, in the kind of activism at hand, it is very slow and costly for print media to reach many. In the protest movement, social media provides online updates. Social media, especially the Dimitsachin Yisema Facebook page, organizes the protest movement. The efficiency of such media is evident in the fact that within half an hour they could successfully reschedule a planned public protest. These realities thus pushed the activists to the online context.

Some might tend to discount the value of the Internet for countries like Ethiopia where there is a low level of literacy and Internet connectivity. The 2015 Internet penetration rate in Ethiopia is only 2.9% (IWS, 2015). This does not mean, however, that only 2.9% of the population is interacting with the online context. In Ethiopia, the online context of the media interacts with the offline context. Part of the campaign of the Muslim protests is to translate the online context of the Internet into offline contexts. The movements’ supporters print relevant documents, burn various CDs, and pass mobile messages. The online radio outlets have downloadable features and disseminate among friendship networks via mobile connectivity. To this end, the Dimitsachin Yisema Facebook group had a campaign titled, “Let us make history through one Birr.” The strategy was to pass three mobile messages of the protest movement to friends without financial pressure. The messages also travel fast through words of mouth since the society is communal. Thus, the Internet and information communities played a significant role.

Muslim rights advocates are indeed very much active in online media. One of the web pages, followed by over 100,000 people, is Dimitsachin Yisema, as mentioned earlier. I followed this page for periodic developments within the Muslim communities. This Facebook page is mainly prepared
in Amharic. There are also Arabic, English, Oromifa, and Tigrigna pages, but the posts on these pages are not updated and their followers are very few. As a result, I have followed the Amharic page for the last 3 years. From it, I secured important dates related to public demonstrations and the prosecution of the Arbitration Committee.

The view of the protest activists, the genesis of the movement, and various developments are not difficult to assess, partly because, as any other activists, they have written about them, broadcasted radio programs, prepared documentaries, and issued statements. All these data sources are available and served as data sources. There are important documents that are worth mentioning. ከወንህ ይህ ከው (This is the truth) is a compilation of letters sent to various stakeholders and the state. I also used as information sources online radio stations that broadcast on a weekly basis, of which the most popular are Berekah Broadcasting Network (BBN), Radio Najāshī (RN), and Fith Radio (FR). YouTube videos of rallies conducted all over the world and the countryside were also part of the analysis. Important videos were, among others, various records of the Awolia demonstration, state-sponsored documentaries, and responses of the activists to state documentaries, the two documentaries of the Ethiopian Diaspora about the EIASC, Parliament discussion, and state reports. I also looked at pamphlets that were distributed and at international and local media’s outputs.

I also looked at WikiLeaks cables as a source of information. The reason is two-fold. First, both the Islamic and private media in Ethiopia used these documents in relation to religiously motivated radicalism, albeit differently. For supporters of the present protest movement, the cables became evidence that the EPRDF’s perceptions and actions are informed by the position of the United States. For various critics of the movement also, the cables are independent sources that attest to the reality of Islamic radicalism. Thus, regardless of the truthfulness of the content, the cables are playing a decisive role towards understanding the actions of the state towards Islam. Secondly, as Lefebvre argues (2012, p. 705), “illegally” leaked state documents have a practical utility in unpacking the behind-the-scene influences of individuals and bureaucratic institutions. As he suggested, I took a cautionary measure in the use of the cables by balancing them with the historic, political, and strategic factors that have shaped American policy.

The official discourses only, however, do not tell much about the EPRDF’s policy towards Islam. Therefore, it is important to look into other sources. In this regard, the EPRDF’s actions provide windows of opportunities. Identification of events as crucial for further analysis was possible through surveying official statements, training materials, suggestions of researchers, and popular narratives that circulate among the religiously diverse communities. In doing so, it was not sufficient to look into only the perspectives of the EPRDF but also those narratives that are circulating among the Muslim communities. In the effort, all the leads were properly weighed against evidence in order
to unpack the EPRDF’s policy towards Islam. In establishing a cause and effect linkage between the events and the actions, the overall purpose was not to reduce complexities but rather to reveal them.

2.8.7 Conspiracy documents

The study also examined the three state documents widely circulated among the movement’s advocates in line with the conspiracy narrative that the state is targeting Islam. The first document that circulated in online media is under the caption, “Leaked minutes from the PM Office; Growing Muslim activism and national security.” The document is a scanned copy, and it does not have either the signatures of the attendees or the stamp of the Office of the Prime Minister it purportedly represents. The released document is dated June 22, 2012, just two months before the announcement of the death of Meles Zenawi. To give an impression of authenticity, however, each page contains, “C:\ PM Office\My documents\ Moslim 004.” Allegedly, it is the meeting note of eight high-level security officials of the state, led by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. The overall depiction in the document is that there is a high-level conspiracy that intends to maintain the status quo, the historic marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims. The document extols the late PM as a rational person who is ready to make a policy change. It also vindicates the actions of the protest movement leaders, paints very positively the Muslim ministers as having solidarity with the requests of the Muslims, and implicates the MoFA minister as the main source of the problem.

The reception of the document was diverse; for some it is bogus, for others it does have some grains of truths and was thus selectively appropriated without commenting on its authenticity, and for some others the reception was at face value. The general stance of Ethiopian Muslim protesters was to appropriate the document for their cause without delving into the discussion of authenticity. Part of the attraction derives from the fact that the document bluntly endorses the view that there is a high-level state conspiracy and from their vindication of the demands of the Muslim communities through the protest movement leaders. The claims of the documents, however, are diametrically opposed to the actions of the state that followed it. It was within a couple of weeks after the purported resolutions of the meeting that the state charged and arrested the protest movement leaders.

The second document that circulated as evidence of state conspiracy was titled, “National Plans for Resolving Religious Fundamentalism and Ethnic Conflicts: Concepts and Strategic Directions,” a training material designed for high-level EPRDF officials. The document does not have any introductory notes that indicates who issued it. I raised the authorship of the documents to experts in MoFA, and they said it is not theirs. Looking at the content, they also remarked that in terms of content it resembles their material and probably drew from various documents the ministry issued. I have also compared the document with various articles issued in the EPRDF’s analytical magazine.
Addis Raeiy. My conclusion is that it does not differ much and that indeed the EPRDF is the author of the document. As the name implies, the overall purpose of the documents is providing awareness concerning religious fundamentalism and ethnic conflicts. In fact, the ethnic conflict is a marginal issue in the document. The overall approach is to set forth the background of religious radicalism and suggest a broader roadmap to contain it.

The above-mentioned document resonated strongly among the protesting Muslim communities. As a training material for creating awareness, the interpretation among Muslim protesters is that it is a plot. In fact, it circulates with the title, “The plot of EPRDF.” This document not only circulated as it is in the Muslim communities, but also the implications of the content were critically scrutinized. The overall analysis of the protest activists is that the present actions of the state are part of a larger plot, a well-contemplated intention directed against Islam. The EPRDF thus turned from an oppressing state into an agent that implements the vision of Israel and its ally the United States. The September 10, 2013 Facebook update of Dimitsachin Yisema aptly summarizes the assessment by Muslim activists of the document. It says, “Those who read the 42-page document page by page have the impression that they should change the title from ‘resolving radicalism’ into destroying Islam.” For the activists, thus, the inclusion of Christian radicalism in the discussion was a pretext to form an opinion that Islam is not the target. Various online Islamic radio stations also provided extended coverage and analysis of the document, and their summary was that Islam is the target of the state.

The third document is a defunct member’s 68-page analysis of the regime’s policy towards Islam titled, “EPRDF’s anti-Ethiopian Islam campaign: Causes, its impact and future directions.” The author, Abdallah Adem Teki, was a member of the EPRDF for 14 years. He wrote the critique with a spirit of remorse. The document, similar to the above two, attempts to link various events and actions of the state in a way to prove that the target is Islam. It situates the events that are happening in Ethiopia as an extension of the Western world. The circulation of this document was very different from the others. Various Islamic radio outlets narrated the document. Besides the narration, the protest movement activists used it as a voice from within the EPRDF, insider information that uncovers the true face of the EPRDF.

These three documents, among others, seem to form an interpretive grid of the Muslim communities that are protesting and are nurturing distrust towards the EPRDF. With these documents, the actual greater enemy is no longer the EIASC leaders but rather the EPRDF’s policy. One should not discount the value of these documents in forming the opinions of the protesters. In almost all of the discussions that I have, Muslims point to these very documents. They also circulate them among themselves. In fact, many Muslims have deleted the documents from their hard drive with the fear that holding them might have consequences from security officials. The documents remain handy, however, through downloadable video and audio files designed to fit not only
computers but also mobiles. Consistently also a request for an explanation of the recent phenomena leads to a suggestion immediately to see these documents. Respondents say, “It is all available on the Internet.” The overall sentiment is that with these documents the fog that blurs become clear. What inextricably intertwines the three documents together is that each says Islam is under attack but in very subtle ways. I used these documents to identify suggested informal policies of the state towards Islam.

2.8.8 The state media

In the state depiction of the protest movement, religious radicalism and extremism, used indiscriminately, are becoming increasingly popular. This necessitates studying the use of the terms and the meaning attached to them. By now, various training materials in relation with religious radicalism and extremism have been produced. Opponents and proponents have made their cases on the net since the print media is highly securitized. Thus, in the unfolding state understanding of religious radicalism and extremism, these materials are used in concert with various documentaries and statements released by the state. One might ask the relevance of the training materials. The use of the materials in determining the EPRDF’s own understanding emanates from the fact that provision of seminars, courses, and educational functions is one of the five methods the EPRDF uses in extending its influence upon various stakeholders, mainly its personnel at various levels of administrative structures (Young, 2010, p. 197). Thus, even if a document might not be that helpful in uncovering the underlying motives of the EPRDF, the documents somehow indicate how the issues are framed. Statements and documentaries that target the public will further augment how the regime views religious radicalism and extremism.

The EPRDF’s approaches of various training materials related to religious freedom and equality usually follow a two-step sequential approach; the first one is the evaluation of the adequacy of the legal framework and then checking its practice. In my approach, I followed the same direction. In cases where there are clear legal frameworks, the frameworks are checked against the actual implementations. In the analysis, a diachronic approach is followed, with the assumption that the past and the present are informing each other. The analysis also attempts to examine various crucial incidents that materialized throughout the period in order to examine the informal institutions that are operating beyond the formal written promulgations. The in-depth interview research is also coupled with ethnographic observations. An ethnographic choice emanates from various grounds. First, studies of informal institutions generally require an ethnographic observation, and it needs to be more data intensive than a survey of formal institutions. Second, an informal institutional approach inevitably conceives politics, in some important measure, as locally produced. As a result, I
employed extensive interviews with (an observation of) the actors themselves to understand the informal constraints they face.

I also looked at those organizations that have relations with the Muslim communities. More specifically, MoFA, the Ethiopian Interreligious Council (EIRC), and the EIASC were the concerns of the study. To this end, I submitted a formal letter that explained the overall purpose of the research and that requested their cooperation. The EIASC assigned the head of the office to respond to my interview questions. He graciously provided me two hours. I also extended a formal request to EIRC, which responded positively by assigning the office’s public relations officer, who is one of the executive board members. A similar kind of in-depth interview followed. Besides the federal level EIRC, an interview was conducted with the Addis Ababa Interreligious Council Head. The MoFA religious affairs directorate also assigned me two officers for my interview, with whom I also conducted interviews. In these three organizations, I was also handed various publications that would explain the organization’s stance on the matter.

These three organizations are not only voicing the same theme but also the same content, which in turn gave an impression that they are state apparatuses. The chapter also critically examines how the state has portrayed religious-related incidents through its own controlled media. In this regard, due attention is provided to the various announcements of the Ministry of Federal Affairs (MoFA), Ethiopian Federal Police Commission (EFPC), and Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), previously known as Ethiopian Television (ETV); pertinent documentaries and public discussions are also reviewed. The Jihadawi Harekat documentary mainly frames the arbitration committee of Muslim protesters with the broader international terrorism narrative. The Ethiopia: One nation, many religions documentary depicts the protest as a violation of the historic religious tolerance. The documentary titled Who killed Sheikh Nuru implicates and warns of the religious extremists’ capabilities. The documentary presents the sheik as the embodiment of religious tolerance and associates his killing with the protest movement’s radical ideology of Wahhabis.

In the analysis section, the content of these documentaries and the reaction to them were taken into account with the hope of understanding the tension and the varying narratives of both the state and the protesters. In the research I provide due attention to the remark of Meles Zenawi, and various training documents and the three documentaries designed to discredit the movement are discussed. The remark of Meles Zenawi implicates the protesters as foreign-financed Salafis, who have no respect for religious tolerance culture. In the narrative, their main intent is to establish the Islamic state. The documentaries in a way are further expositions of his remarks. The One nation many religions documentary frames the protest movement within the historic cultural tolerance narrative, showing that the religious extremists by discrediting it are endangering religious peaceful
coexistence. The *Jihadawi Harekat* documentary depicts the protest movement as an agenda of Al-Qaeda to establish an Islamic state and the protest leaders as agents of terror.

In the analysis of the state media depiction, it becomes much more evident how local issues have been creatively intertwined with global activities so that in return they would invoke memories for justification of an action. In the process, however, despite the efforts of linking the local with regional and global incidents, it becomes clear that, without discounting the role of the global world national factor, the local motivations are more important in explaining the matters. The uses of international factors, however, have their own ends to serve even in cases where their role in shaping state attitude towards Islam and Muslims is not that significant. The disentanglement of the local from regional and global incidents is not to deny the influence but to show that local factors primarily shape state attitude towards Islam. In fact, the state has effectively merged these regional and international incidents into its own narrative to increase its legitimacy among the international communities.

The prevalence of the behind-the-scene operations made conspiracy theories more appealing to the general public and more so amidst the Ethiopian Muslim communities. Muslim activists that are protesting against the state have presented the state as a conspiring agent against Ethiopian Muslims. In doing so, they tapped into the already prevailing perception that the state pursues agendas that it does not state publicly. The momentous role of such documentaries in shaping both the reaction and the role of Ethiopian Muslims is far reaching. In fact, in almost all of the dialogues that I had with the protest movement supporters, the recommendation was to view these very documentaries. More specifically, a documentary titled *Conspiracy of the Ethiopian state & the Ahbash cult against Ethiopian Muslims* is the most popular one. These documentaries and many others are circulating among the Muslim communities and are available online.

**2.8.9 Periodization**

In studying the contemporary Ethiopian state policy towards Islam, I covered the years between 1991 and 2015. The year 1991 is when the revolutionary EPRDF ousted the socialist military state that had stayed in power for 17 years. The overall attempt throughout the two and a half decades is to capture the intricate complexities of the state’s policy towards Islam in the post-1991 period. Such an objective requires identification of policy developments over time and provides an opportunity to create both forward and backward linkage between emerging themes and to situate the emerging themes within the immediate and the larger context. In documenting how state policies progressed over the study period, some sort of periodization is inevitable.

This attempt to divide logically the state’s policy change towards Islam in the last two and half decades was indeed a daunting task. In this regard, the collected data and the available works of
literature were very helpful. The data suggested that the election year and the month of July (the first month of the budget year) serves very well in tracing the policy changes. Elections in Ethiopia are held once every 5 years starting from 1995, the last one being in 2015. The periodization of the post-1991 period with minor modification thus followed the national election years as dividing marks. It is following the elections that the EPRDF announces its strategic plan for the next five years. More specifically the years that mark the state’s policy were 1995, 2001, 2005, and 2009. From the lists, however, it is clear that the year 2001 and year 2009 are not election years. In the following two paragraphs, I explain why I deviated from my own suggestion.

The choice of 2001 over 2000 is on two grounds. First, the May 2000 election, unlike the previous election year, did not put into effect the policy direction of the state. Of course, this is not unique in its policy towards Islam but rather encompasses all spheres of government activities. The basic reason is the Ethiopian-Eritrean war and its aftermath. The impact of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war extending through 2001 was the primary occupation of the EPRDF since it created division within TPLF central committee members and EPRDF senior officials. Thus, in that period new policy initiatives were in practice ineffectual. Second, the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) made the nation into a stable ally to the United States in the Horn of Africa, which brought the role of Ethiopia in the troubled Horn of Africa into prominence. With the new alliance, there was also a policy change.

The choice of 2009 over 2010 has also three reasons. First, it is in this year that legal frameworks that reduce the political space were completed. Second, in the year 2009, taking into account the increasing religious conflicts, the state started to take pre-emptive measures that it conceived would promote religious tolerance and curb violent incidents among Christians and Muslims. It is also in the year 2009 that MoFA restructured so that it includes religious affairs under its purview. Third, in 2009 the second Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) was in its planning stage, and religious affairs secured greater attention than ever.
Chapter Three: Nationhood and Religious Identity

3.1 Introduction

The overall endeavor of the chapter is to offer a bird’s eye view concerning the available scholarship of Ethiopian history in analyzed form beginning from the Aksumite period. In essence, the chapter is a brief summary of a complex and rich historical repository. The intent is to explore the historical resources from which memory entrepreneurs skillfully draw to advance their present concerns. Providing a detailed historiography of the Ethiopian monarchs and the socialist military state’s (Derg) relation to Ethiopian Islam and Muslims, however, is not the main objective of this chapter. The chapter also focuses on the remark of Erlich (2006, p. 233), “Ethiopia, once a Christian island in Africa…” Erlich is not the only historian that espoused Ethiopia as a Christian nation. There are many local and foreign Ethiopia experts, or Ethiopia nists, that have advanced the notion of a Christian Ethiopia as an indisputable historical fact since the fourth century conversion of King Ezana.

The overall objective of this chapter is to examine religious nationhood and religious identity via the conception that Ethiopia was and is a Christian nation. The contest of the notion is the religious heterogeneity of its citizens as a long enduring, defining feature. Such a claim, however, is not insightful unless the very concept of a Christian nation is explained. A distinct but related concept to the Christian notion of Ethiopia is the territorial claims of the Christian kingdoms. The validity of the image as a historical representation or an invention hinges upon the congruence between the territorial claims of the nation (including its inhabitants) and the images advanced. Given that the territorial claim of Ethiopia in the minds of its states and inhabitants extended much beyond the Abyssinian proper, the image of Christian Ethiopia is thus questionable for the religiously diverse population. The image fails to capture its historical reality unless the Christian kingdom was equated with its religiously diverse subjects and it ignores different customs to which they adhered.

As such, this historical review seeks to establish that Ethiopia always harbored religious diversity. In order to establish this thesis, I begin by discussing the notion of a Christian Ethiopia (3.2). Related to the notion of a Christian nation, I also suggest criteria looking into a similar contemporary contest (3.3.1) and looking into history (3.3.2). Once I set a Christian Ethiopian image and suggest criteria to evaluate the claim, I indicate how the Christian image of Ethiopia is increasingly contested (3.4). I also argue that Ethiopian history, even if embellished, has a troubled past (3.5). Owing to the fact that the role of the Middle East, more specifically Saudi Arabia, frequently arises in discussions of the reform movements in Ethiopia, I also briefly discuss that alliance and suspicion (3.6).
Once I show that there is a contest in the historical depiction of Ethiopian history, I discuss both the formative periods and subsequent historical developments of Ethiopian Christianity (3.7) and Ethiopian Islam (3.8) in chronological order, with the exception of the discussion of the Prester John legend. More specifically, the image of Ethiopians in Islam’s formative periods (3.8.1), its expansion in Ethiopia (3.8.2), and demographic and religious characteristics (3.8.3) are the focus. Given that the Christian kingdoms and Muslim sultanates dominate the history of Ethiopia, I revisit their relationship (3.9). In relation to the Socialist Derg government, I stress that religion was treated as an undesirable historical heritage (3.10). In setting forth the historical narratives, the chapter situates episodes that were imprinted in enduring negative memory in the collective consciousness of Ethiopian Christians and Muslims within historical contexts.

The Prester John legend is placed last because the intent is to show how the legend affected the image of Ethiopia among Westerners. In a way, the chapter also hopes to highlight the Christian Ethiopia notion that contributed to the political marginalization of Muslims and Islam. In unpacking the nature of the “Christian nation” designation, the varied actors’ roles in the image production and perseverance require attention. Related to the West, I discuss the legend of Prester John (3.11) that shaped the medieval understanding of Ethiopia in Europe.

In this chapter, I underscore the role of the lucrative trade and political gains as the most detrimental factor in the conflictual encounters of the two religious political leaders. In brief, the chapter hopes to demonstrate that religious diversity has always been the defining feature of the nation. As a corollary to it, the endeavor is also to show that Islam in the pre-1991 (3.12) period was part of the nation’s life but marginalized from the accounts, and the Christian nation image of Ethiopia played a role.

### 3.2 The Notion of a Christian Ethiopia

The conversion of Ezana and the subsequent recognition of Christianity as a state religion made Ethiopia the third Christian political entity in history and the first in Africa, following Armenia (A.D. 301) and the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine (in 312) (Erlich, 2002, p. 15). For centuries, the notion of a Christian Ethiopia was taken for granted. Historians applied the term without elucidating it, and thereby the complexity of the notion remained unappreciated. In the last two decades, however, the notion has become increasingly contested. With the contest also surfaced the complexity of the Christian notion of Ethiopia, demanding exposition. The question is both a matter of historical depth and a contemporary one. What is at stake is the extent to which the Christian notion has referential validity to Ethiopia’s past as well as its present condition. Inextricably intertwined with the notion of Christian Ethiopia is also the issue of Ethiopia’s borders.
Ethiopianist researchers do not confuse the fourth century Ethiopia with the current Ethiopia’s geographical space. The Christian Ethiopia designation, thus, for the Ethiopianist is a description of the historic Abyssinia or Habash. In the chronicles of Arabs, from which Ethiopianist historians draw much, Habash generally connotes a Christian religious identity. Until the mid-10th century, Abyssinia was the predominant name applied to the nation. Some researchers still employ the term in order to distinguish it from the larger area of modern day Ethiopia.\(^5\) The core of the kingdom encompassed the Tigray highlands, but its sphere of effective control stretched through Eritrea down to the coast of the Red Sea (Keller, 1991, p. 16; Robinson, 2004, p. 108). For some scholars, calling that area the Ethiopian nation-state was the invention of late 19th century imperialism (Asafa, 1998, p. 29; Holcomb & Sisai, 1990, p. 346).

The Ethiopianist researchers, despite their own conceptual distinction between the historic Abyssinia and the present Ethiopia, indiscriminately continue to employ the Christian designation as if the notion has been a static mark. The application of the designation to a historical boundary that incorporated areas where traditional religion adherents and Muslims dominate is, of course, problematic. The failure to redefine the identity of Ethiopia beyond the Christian nation with contracting and expanding territorial boundaries is not without effect. The image of Christian Ethiopia also served as, more than a factual historical account, the ruling classes’ ideological justification to the throne and a way of marshaling support from the West. As Ethiopianist researchers continued to use the term indiscriminately, the popular notion of Christian pervaded the conceptual distinction. More so, as the conception extends indiscriminately to the present day, the referential validity of Christian Ethiopia becomes doubtful. Inherent to the contest of the Christian notion of Ethiopia lies the nation’s historical religious landscape heritage that harbored diversity. Part of the debate is also the extent to which the image of Christian Ethiopia served in marginalizing Muslims and treating them as secondary citizens, hindering their full participation in the national political past.

Any historical review of Ethiopian monarchs should take into account the historical symbiotic relationship between the monarchical states and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahado Church (EOTC). The association of the church and the state by extension implies that inquiry into the state and Ethiopian Islam should not overlook Ethiopian Christianity. The intertwining of the state and the church is evident when one notes that some of the kings, who also treated with cruelty their own Muslim population, are revered as saints in Synaxarium (The book of the saints of the Ethiopian

\(^5\) Habash is Arabs’ designation for Ethiopia, from which the English Abyssinia and related European language names derive. It means “mixed” and refers to Habashat, the name of the coastal tribe. Ethiopians generally refrain from using it and consider the term as derogatory (R. Pankhurst & Gérard, 1996, p. 9). After 1991 the term was increasingly used to designate a contemporary Ethiopia as an “Amhara-dominated state” (Krylow, 1994, p. 17). Very recently the term started to be used nostalgically to mean the ancient heyday.
Orthodox Täwahədo Church). Cognizant of the connection of the state and the church, the remark of Loimeier (2013, p. 132) is apt. He said, “In many respects Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia have thus come to constitute each other’s flipside and cannot be understood without regarding the respective other.” Trimingham (1952, p. 22) also similarly remarks, “Without some knowledge of it (Ethiopian Christianity) the history of Ethiopian Islam would be incomprehensible.” Due to such a historical relationship and its continued impact, this chapter also discusses the EOTC at length. Owing to the fact that the political role of evangelical Christianity was not that great in both the monarchical period and the socialist regime, the chapter does not discuss those eras much.

The use of Ethiopian as an adjective for Muslims and Christians is intentional. Adherents of both religions prefer to be addressed so despite the fact that the two religions claim universality. To the religious adherents, the use of the term is more than a geographical designation. The term Ethiopia connotes an indigenous identity claim. The significance of the term is evident when one notes that Ethiopian Muslims, prior to the socialist regime, were referred to as Muslims living in Ethiopia. In a similar way, the Haile Selassie state rejected the adjective “the Ethiopian” before Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus on the ground that “Ethiopian” was reserved only for Orthodox Christianity. Even in the present day, EOTC adherents continue to refer the church as the Orthodox church. In a secondary sense, the Ethiopian self-designation also connotes and derives from the uniqueness narrative embedded in Ethiopian culture. As it is in all spheres of life, Ethiopian Muslims and Christians think themselves unique in some respect when compared to their coreligionists outside Ethiopia.

Besides the religious adherents’ self-designation and perception, there is also a sense in which the term is historically accurate. Abbink (1998, pp. 111-112) also notes the Ethiopian character of the two religions in terms of their historic seclusion and self-sufficiency, despite the fact that Islam and Christianity are universal religions. The implication of the uniqueness narrative both as self-designation and as historical reality delimits also the scope of this chapter. With the exception of a few significant events, the overall emphasis is on national developments rather than the connection of the two religions with their coreligionists outside Ethiopia.

### 3.3 A Christian Nation: Suggesting Criteria

Referring to the late Prime Minister Meles, a January 25, 2008 interview with the Guardian stated, “Meles also repeated claims that Qatar and other un-named Arab Sunni Muslim states were financing Eritrea's covert operations against Orthodox Christian Ethiopia” (Tisdall, 2008). In the pre-1991 period, the image of Ethiopia as Orthodox Christian and the Arab states as its archenemy did not invoke public dissent. Most Ethiopians and foreigners would consider the Christian
characterization simply as factually accurate, historic, demographic, and cultural in nature. Ethiopia as a Christian nation surrounded by Muslims and the hostility of Arabs was usually assumed.

It was only five days later that an Islamic newspaper, *al-Quds*, challenged the notion of an Orthodox Christian Ethiopia. In the month of February, the court charged and sentenced to 1 year of imprisonment the editor, Ezedin Muhammad, for negatively commenting against the notion of Ethiopia espoused by Meles (CPJ, 2010). The newspaper’s contention against the Christian image of Ethiopia was not an isolated case. Many Ethiopian Muslims increasingly do not feel at ease with the characterization of Ethiopia as Orthodox Christian both as the description of its past or the contemporary reality. Even if most of the debates center on the accuracy of religious statistics, the implication is far beyond that. The contest provides an insight that times have changed. The Christian notion of Ethiopia is clearly becoming ideological, a claim of centrality both in Ethiopia’s past and its future.

In order to appreciate the question, I examine the sense in which the Christian nation is used. To this end, I look into the concept and its application in the contemporary debate in Ethiopia. A survey of the literature reveals that the hallmarks of a Christian nation have not been well articulated, as common sense would seem to dictate. In most works of literature, the application of the notion is without discussion. In order to be perspicuous in our expressions of such signification, however, I should go beyond familiarity with our ears. In fact, the question of a Christian nation is not unique to Ethiopia. The same question divides the religious right and politically active secularists on the liberal left in the United States. In the following paragraphs, I look into the debate in the US (3.3.1) with the hope that it will shed some light in order to develop normative criteria for the contemporary Ethiopian question. After that, I look at the question as a historical question (3.3.2). What I am trying to ascertain here are the primary marks of a Christian nation.

### 3.3.1 Looking into similar contemporary contests

For religious right conservatives, America has been a Christian nation from its foundation, while others maintain autonomy and rationality of the enlightenment ideals that characterize the nation. The difficulty of answering this question is partly because the two options are not mutually exclusive. The challenge is further multiplied by the failure to produce a fair level of consensus about normative evaluative criteria that delineates the desirable characteristics of a Christian nation. Moreover, most of all, the question is fraught with a fear that the Christian worldview is at stake. Heclo (2007, pp. 61-87) summarized the seven different senses in which the question might be approached and the varying answers each sense entails.

I classified his seven criteria into three arguments – namely demographic arguments, the argument of influence, and the theological feasibility argument. The demographic argument hinges
upon statistical figures. The self-identification of its population determines whether a nation is Christian or not. In this demographic argument, the issue is the question of how many percentage of the population view themselves as Christian, turn to the Christian religion for moral guidance, adhere to the basic doctrines of Christianity, and guide their daily behavior in light of Christian values. This argument reduces the overall issue into counting heads. In the Ethiopian case, the tendency of the debate among those who espouse a Christian Ethiopia and those who oppose the notion has centered on the accuracy of the national census. The percentage of Muslims in Ethiopia is a point of controversy.

The self-identification criterion of the citizens of the nation, even if it makes some sense, it does not provide an actual cutoff point. Is it 75%, 50%, or 90%? The cutoff remains arbitrary. One should also note that not all adherents agree on the statistical categories that lumped together different religious traditions under the rubric of Christian. More than anything, the argument begs the defining element of a nation to hinge upon the characteristics of the majority. The moral guidance principle is also very elusive. When is it that we are saying one’s moral guidance is informed by Christianity? Could it not be simultaneous influences of Christianity and other factors? In nations of religious plurality, which moral rules are uniquely Christian? What are we going to look into – the actions or one’s conscience? There could be some dissonance between the two. For example, one might fail to act even if one could hold a moral value. In cases where the contest of the designation is between Muslims and Christians, who share much value, the issue becomes more complex.

The demographic criterion is also unhelpful for adherents of different religions. Taken together, the demographic criteria derive their inspiration from a representative democracy of the vote. The failure of the approach becomes more evident when one notes what the debate entails. It is all about a question of bringing a religious identity to the policy debate and in a way contesting the privatization of religion as espoused in the secularization thesis.

The second criterion evaluates the extent to which Christian values influence the public life of the citizens, primarily the building of its institutions. Here Christian influence conceptualization is a bit more abstract than the former demographic category. The argument requires observing the imprint of the Christian religion in political institutions and the extent to which it served as the basis of the political ethos enacted in the public life. One might hastily conclude that in this sense Ethiopia has been a Christian nation, arguing that the public space is predominantly Christian. In fact, the monarchical Christian state’s ethos was derived from Fitha Nägäst and Kibre Nägäst, the two political documents of the Solomonic dynasty that clearly espoused a Christian perspective. One also could bring up the role of Christianity in education. Before the beginning of the 20th century, the church dominated the nation’s educational system. The sign of the cross adorns old institutions. Both the fences of Addis Ababa University and the palace are decorated with it. Some public spaces are
still held in monopoly by the EOTC to celebrate national holidays, and any attempt to make these spaces equally accessible to the other religions creates havoc. To conclude on these pieces of evidence, however, that Ethiopia is a Christian nation is flawed. When one observes the fact that there was also Quranic education in Ethiopia from ancient times and some places of Ethiopia have a very old Islamic heritage, the Christian nation claim is greatly chastened.

The criteria that look into the imprint of religion in the current institutions and political ethos are also hard to justify. It is not always clear which are the influences of religion, reason, humanism, or enlightenment. After all, none of the influences is effectively attributed to one and excludes the others since the religious sector has its own share in both inventing and appropriating them. Religious people also employ reasons and do not only look mindlessly into the religious texts and traditions.

In the final category of theological criterion lies the Christian theology. The suggestion of Heclo (2007) is to scrutinize whether the notion of a Christian nation is possible or not. Following the conservative interpretation of the bible, he argues that the notion of a Christian nation is a misnomer. In this sense, at least from the perspective of the EOTC, Christian Ethiopia is not an oxymoron. There is no inherent contradiction in the term. In fact, given that Ethiopia replaced as God’s favorite the nation Israel, then, the designation of Christian Ethiopia makes sense to the adherents. Despite the fact that his proposal is multifactor and more informed than the emotion-laden rhetoric of both camps, the seven different senses do not fully help in answering the question.

The argument of compatibility of a Christian nation with the biblical teaching is also very simplistic. It ignores the fact that one’s religious position towards the notion of a Christian nation is a matter of adequate exegesis of verses in the bible. Besides being a conservative approach, it ignores the role of one’s traditions, experiences, and reason as a source of inspiration. The approach also ignores the fact that both the medieval and the reformation era of Europe exhibited a marriage between the church and the state. For a nation like Ethiopia, warrior kings are also revered saints. Some of the above answers become ineffective to unlock the question for countries that have a history from antiquity, and no fruitful debate could be made about their founding fathers.

The above seven senses thus have serious limitations to expound the question of the Christian nation of Ethiopia. What characterizes the above seven senses is that each sense frames the issue as a contemporary matter and, thus, it does not help at all to answer the question as a historical reality. Given that the question of Christian Ethiopia is not only a contemporary question but also rather also a historical one that stretches into the fourth century, I should look into other sources that discuss the notion of Christian Ethiopia.

I noted that the historical quest towards a Christian nation notion of the religious adherents is not only about objectively representing the past, but rather unearthing a heritage upon which they
could proudly erect themselves as fully Ethiopian. The quest is not to unlock the past objectively but rather to construct a helpful past for the present quest. After all, the question is fraught not only with intellectual curiosity but also with the prestigious status the answer confers. It is an answer with benefit. The criteria become even more problematic if one attempts to evaluate the claim in the medieval period or before that. The criteria are clearly anachronistic to some of the communal mindsets of earlier periods of human history and some cultures. In cases that they apply also, we do not have demographic data to support our claims. We should look for a better suggestion.

3.3.2 Looking into history

Walls’ (2015) proposal is insightful into the conception of the origin of the Christian nation notion. His theorization about the Christian notion came in a section where he dealt with the coherence of Christianity with various cultures with which it interacted. To this end, he marked six distinct but interrelated phases of Christian history. Each phase has an impression from that culture, a significant imprint that molds it. Since our concern is the question of a Christian nation, I limit the discussion to the third age. According to Walls, the Christian nation conception is the invention of the barbarian age or the third phase of Christianity in its interaction with the prevailing dominant culture. The pejorative term barbarian is the way the Hellenistic world viewed those other than themselves.

The period’s delineation is between the collapse of the Roman Empire and the reformation period. The second important factor that contributed to transitioning into this age is the rise of the Arabs as a world power along with the fall of the Roman Empire. Following these two events, the period exhibited the arduous task of evangelization. The process was not the result of an instantaneous imperial decree but rather that of a slow, painful, and far from satisfactory spread of Christian allegiance among the tribal people beyond the old frontiers. The newly emerged Christianity thus amalgamated the ideas of the Patristic period with the attitudes of the primal world. As part of the primal world, not only did the new Christian communities become a Christian community but also Christianity became their custom. In these communities, decisions were not mainly private, so at some point in time it was inevitable for a consensus to emerge. When it did, it created homogeneity and that became the custom and the culture of the people. Behind the commonality lay powerful customs that brought to an end differences and consequently resulted in the fruition of the Christian nation. The church and the nation thus became coterminous in scope. Religion became one aspect of the culture that bound a society together.

The novelty of Walls in relation to the third age is not that of naming, since ascribing a Christian nation designation for European history of the medieval period is quite common knowledge. His contribution to the discussion is the way he explicated the process. The fusion of the communities’
character into the ideas of the Patristic period without denying that the reception process also has its imprint is the novelty of his approach. His grid also systematically differentiates the power of an imperial decree and the power of custom in terms of effectively enforcing a group identity, which is a Christian religious identity. The heuristic value of his characterization is powerful. Indeed, the Romans engaged in persecution, such as when Theodosius issued decrees that authorized Christianity as the only legal religion of the Roman Empire. The decree was not as effective as creating a uniform society that wholeheartedly follows the decree. What the enforcement produced at best was a type of Christianity that was formal and ceremonial, which partly explains the rise of the monastic movement in defiance and in search of an authentic religious experience.

The grid, however, fails to consider adequately the fact that even in the medieval periods of Europe Christian communities were not the only expressions of religiosity. There were indeed some religious groups like the Jews, for example, that were tolerated and at times protected by the religious communities. The tolerated religious minorities are of some service to the predominant religious groups. The tolerated religious minorities usually engage in activities that are not honorable to the communities. For example, in Ethiopia, where Christianity formed the very core of the society, Muslims and Jews were allowed to engage in trade and crafts, occupations considered generally as inferior compared to occupation as a farmer. The treatment of these subjects was as foreigners or secondary citizens rather than full-fledged members of the communities. Religious conversions or significant ties with the minority were usually made difficult through social sanctions or outlawed in the customs. There was also a motivation to convert from the group to the dominant culture since it provided access to a sort of mobility from the margins into the center.

Understood in Walls’ term is, then, the concept that the Christian nation becomes a state in which a slow homogenization process emerges as a custom that fuses the society into one. If I qualify his statement and introduce marginalization narratives to minority religious identities, thus, we have a broader conceptual criteria than a mere demographic one. From this perspective, to be a Christian nation implied a Christian religion becomes the dominant custom, it has a symbolic capital, and it confers some sort of status or rank to Christians over other religious adherents. The question of a Christian nation thus becomes a question of boundary that accrues prestige to Christian members and denies it to the others. In this sense, Ethiopia was not a Christian nation but a Christian kingdom before the Solomonic kingdom, since there were pockets that did not fall under the influence of both the Aksumite and the Zagwé dynasty. After the Solomonic kingdom, however, the nation progressively became a Christian nation, which also meant the marginalization of Muslims and other religious minorities from Ethiopian national life and politics. The marginalization was from the Christian central state, and Muslims were allowed to govern their own population as long as they
paid tribute. With the 19th century expansion and state building, the marginalization reached its apex, primarily preferring Christians to Muslims as a political strategy of creating cohesiveness.

3.4 Contesting the Image of Christian Ethiopia

Positive and negative images of Ethiopia abound (Levine, 2000, pp. 1-25; A. Pankhurst, 2006, pp. 58-59; R. Pankhurst & Gérard, 1996, pp. 1-3). The invented images, nevertheless, did not always correspond to realities. As Levine (2000, p. 15) remarks, the depictions of Ethiopia somehow combine a grain of truth with the artistic imagination of poetic fancy, religious aspiration, or political ambitions. The divergence of imagination from reality, in fact, should not surprise. After all, as Reynolds (2011, pp. 25-26) points out, image construction is always a subjective process and its results are somehow a simplified version of reality. As a rule, the conflation of images with reality is at best reductionism that robs the complexity of human relations. Inherent to all portrayals and their accompanying narratives are the historical situations that prompted them (Rubenson, 2009, p. 117).

The heated debate and contest that surrounds national images, however, is not at all a futile exercise. Behind the quest lies a realization that the images are not trivial matters. Indeed, the effectual appropriation continues to affect the present and future relations, both locally and internationally. For example, the image of Christian Ethiopia serves as a hindrance to joining the Arab League as some Ethiopian Muslims envision. Shnirelman (2010/7, p. 1) notes the utility of the past narratives in nationalists’ quest. His observation is also applicable to other group identities, of which religious identity could be one.

One of the images that have taken centrality in the Ethiopian public sphere in relation to the religious discourse is the depiction of Ethiopia as a “Christian nation.” For some Muslims, the term connotes the two presumed historical institutions that exhibited animosity towards Ethiopian Muslims, the Ethiopian Christian states and their historical ally, the EOTC. Perhaps the conflation of the two derives from the fact that the monarchy and the EOTC were the two important institutions that guided Ethiopian’s history (Welz, 2013, p. 81). Inherent to the debates is also a reviving religiosity that views one’s own religious traditions as both infallible and historically accurate. In the EOTC’s depiction, Ethiopia is a “chosen nation,” and in the Muslims’ narrative, it is a “land of the first Hijrah” (Dereje, 2013, p. 36; Teshale, 1995, p. 14). The quest is thus not only about history but also a theological claim that has its base in the religious traditions.

A “Christian nation” designation of Ethiopia is dearly held by the EOTC as due credit to the church’s contribution to the national life. Conversely, the term is considered exclusionary and hegemonic among Ethiopian Muslim activists (Dereje, 2013, pp. 29-32). The persistent depiction of Ethiopia as a “Christian nation” partly explains the phase of revivalism and self-assertion of the marginalized religious group. To the activists, Ethiopia is also the founder of Islam since it is the
second nation that accepted Islam after Mecca and the first nation whose king became a Muslim. In line with the general trend of previously marginalized groups, Islam in Ethiopia is demanding a fair share in representing the nation (Jon Abbink, 1998, pp. 122-123). The contest over the history of Ethiopia was clear in the 2009 celebration of Epiphany. In the celebration, young adherents of the EOTC wore t-shirts on which it was written, “I will not hand over the inheritance from my fathers” and “Ethiopia is a Christian island,” which infuriated both the state and Muslims. The claim in simple terms is that Ethiopia is and shall remain a Christian land. A “Christian nation” designation thus indicates EOTC adherents’ aspiration to continue as a defining feature of being Ethiopia proper.

Quoted in Markakis (2011, p. 126), the last emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie (who reigned from 1930-1974) addressed the Congress of the United States in 1954. In his speech, Ethiopia was described as the “largest Christian state in the Middle East.” The Christian nation designation thus as its background has Islam and Muslims. The “Christian nation” portrayal by an Ethiopian king to the West is of course not the first of its kind. Ethiopian monarchs as they relate to the West and with their neighboring countries invoked this very image. S.A. Hussien (1997, pp. 129-135) argues, for example, that the nation has been successfully appropriating the myth and the depiction has become detrimental in its foreign relations. Some scholars thus contend that the use of the term reflects the already existing negative view towards Islam (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 6).

The Christian depiction, however, was not only a one-way road in Ethiopia’s international image. Europeans have also contributed to the “Christian Ethiopia” image building since the medieval period. Reflecting on the Medieval period of Europe, Teshale (1995, p. 16) remarks, “It was the fear of Islam that brought Christian Europe into the consciousness of Christian Ethiopia.” The late 19th century correspondence with European imperial forces also used “Christian Ethiopia” mainly to shield the nation on the eve of the scramble of Africa (Rubenson, 2009, pp. 117-125). This is not to deny that the image somehow also reflects the vision of Christian monarchs to see its population united under one religion. The images of Ethiopia depicted in academia also reflect the images held by foreign Ethiopianist scholars and their informants. Such an assessment is not an overstatement, given that foreigners predominantly studied Ethiopian cultures and societies. This, however, does not mean that there were not some good anthropological works. There have been anthropological works since the 1920s and more so after the 1950s by Italian, German, French, British, American, and Japanese researchers. With these scholars, both the geographical areas and ethno-linguistic groups’ coverage significantly increased (A. Pankhurst, 2006, pp. 54-59).

At present, the term Christian Ethiopia invokes various feelings. For some it is still an apt description of the Ethiopian reality since Christians are still the majority and Ethiopia’s culture predominantly reflects just that. For example, Hearn (2006 p. 53) remarks, “Ethiopia has not shed its predominantly Christian identity – whether on a national or international level.” For Hearn, the
designation does not seem to be aberrant even if she realizes exclusion of Islam from national life is unwarranted. For others, however, the term is an apex of deception. Lulat (2005, p. 57), for example, bluntly states that the image that Ethiopia is and has always been a Christian country is “among the most successful global propaganda achievements of an African state.”

Reducing the Christian image of Ethiopia into population statistics, however, does not do justice to history. Christians were not the majority at every corner. In the eastern periphery, for example, Muslims were the majority, and the influence of the central state in daily life was very marginal. Historically, to be a Christian was not merely adhering to a Christian religion. It entitled one to benefits. The designation has much to do with nationhood and national identity and clearly defines one’s inclusion or exclusion from political life. Despite the religious diversity of the nation, as Messay (2008, p. 126) remarks, “… for centuries the EOTC defined the Ethiopian identity… The Ethiopian identity was inseparably blended with Orthodox Christianity.” In a similar line, Trimmingham (1952, p. 22) argues, “Christianity is the bulwark of Ethiopian nationality.” Attempts at integration using the Amhara language (Amharic) and religion (Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Christianity) as symbols of national identity were also a source of conflicts (Beken, 2012, p. 21).

As Donham (1999, p. 143) notes, as a result of the appropriot of Orthodox Christian culture as Ethiopian, converting to another religion was tantamount to rejecting Ethiopian nationality. The conception of a convert thus is that of becoming a foreigner. Equating Ethiopians with the EOTC emanated from the fact that the monarchs of the Abyssinia core and modern Ethiopia were claiming divine election after the notable figures of the Old Testament, such as Moses or Solomon the king. The Ethiopian identity created through a Christian image, however, was exclusionary. It set aside other religious identities from the national life.

To understand the isolation, the following sections explain the lineage of the EOTC and its association with the state. Such a task is inevitable given that the foundational role of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopian national identity rests on its claim of ancient lineage and intimate association with the state. As Abbink (1998, p. 115) notes, however, uncritically equating all the actions of the emperors with that of the clergy might result in fallacy, since at times the two are at odds on matters of policy, issues of morality, or law and justice. According to Gâdlâ Aron (hagiography), the priests refused the administration of the Eucharist for King Amdâ Seyon on the ground of polygamy (Roberts & Yamane, 2011, p. 8). There are historical incidents where the monarchs and bishops confronted each other (Ancel & Ficquet, 2015, p. 68).
3.5 A Troubled and Embellished Past

“Ethiopia is a country burdened by its past,” which I owe to Czeslaw Jes´man, is a widely quoted dictum among scholars for its apt description of the nation’s life (Adhana, 1994, p. 12; Asnake, 2013, p. 16; Praeg, 2006, p. 5). Perhaps Adhana (1994, p. 12) also did not exaggerate in proposing that the present Ethiopia and its pressing issues are better understood through historical inquiry than any other disciplines. Finneran (2007, p. xiv) also remarks on the implications of the narratives of the past. The narratives have social, cultural, and ideological utility. He succinctly summarizes, “[The] Ethiopian past was (and indeed is) very much a part of Ethiopian present, serving to shape a very definite concept of identity.” In the international scene also, much is drawn from Ethiopia’s distinctive history to increase the country’s international standing (Welz, 2013, p. 84). The utilization of the past, either for contesting or affirming one’s cause, does indicate that Ethiopia has a troubled past, and everyone can draw from it to suit their own interests. The competing narratives drawn from the nation’s complex and rich historical repository clearly relate to the cause one desires to champion. The accounts are far from objectivity if after all such objectivity is possible.

Mohammed (2012, pp. 184-185) characterizes the Ethiopian culture as nostalgic, where the past remains forever as a painful as well as joyous burden. Indeed, a nostalgic culture partly explains the obsession with the past. The student movement of the 1960s, however, viewed Ethiopian history in a negative light and labored to discard it altogether (Messay, 2008, p. 130). It is also true that with the recent negative records of the nation, citizens, political entrepreneurs, and religious leaders look backward either to condemn the past or to get a sense of pride from it. In the recent political discourse, the centrality of ethnicity and its primordial depiction have also made history a necessary companion. Asebe (2012, p. 517) notes that, “following the enunciation of ethnicity as a leading political order in 1991, identities have been articulated in such a way that past historical incidents and memories have been reactivated and old labels have been redefined.”

Abbink (2011, p. 264) is also one of the scholars that notes the recent religious polemics in Ethiopia, among which history is one of the contentions. His research provides evidence that religious polemics, with its fundamentalist flavors, are increasingly sharpening boundaries between faith communities. While the selective utilization of the past explains the debates, it is also true that the main characteristic of its history is a history of marginalization. For some, however, the historical marginalization narrative is an anachronism and Muslims scored better in comparison to any other nations where they were the minority. What cannot be disputed, however, is that “Ethiopian history” is greatly characterized by privileging a particular power structure and the people associated with it (Clapham, 2002, p. 37). It is thus no wonder that the dominant form of historiographical discourse of Ethiopian Islam and its relation to Ethiopian Christians extols the latter. The depiction of Christianity
is mainly that of building the nation, and Islam is related to this overarching narrative only when it clashes with it.

Reconstruction of the past, however, has never been an easy project, and whatever has been achieved is contentious. The religious sense of attachment to the past could easily be noticed when one observes that historical remarks result in a heated debate in an unparalleled way, both in academia and the general population (Toggia, 2011, p. 9). The comprehension of contemporary political, social, economic, and religious discourses, therefore, fails if one hastily dismisses the past. Perceived or real, the nations’ past is continuing to shape the current Ethiopia. The issue of the Ethiopian states and their relation to Islam are not an exception to this rule. As Toggia (2008, p. 330) notes, “the metanarrative of Ethiopian state history excludes other forms of peripheral regimes such as small traditional polities; smaller tributary kingdoms; non-Christian religious orders such as Islam…” These all indicate that the embellished past of Ethiopia is equally troubled.

Fasil (1997, p. 56) notes that religions in Ethiopia were not confined to a private sphere but rather were part of the state’s political structure. The utility of religion in traditional Ethiopian society is driven by the fact that religion used to preside in almost every aspect of Ethiopian life (Mohammed, 2012, p. 80). As Messay (2008, p. 111) argued, the political and the religious were inextricably intertwined and fused. During the monarchic period, there were strong historical and ideological ties between the church and the historic Abyssinian state and society (Abbas, 2014, p. 173). Therefore, any analysis that separates religion from political developments not only becomes inaccurate but also incomprehensible. Ethiopia’s past reflects both the political ambition and the religious influence of the nation in the ancient world (Lee, 2011, p. 77; Taddesse, 1988, p. 5). Even if the influence of the nation’s religiosity dwindled over time, the religiosity of its inhabitants is hard not to notice. Due to the centrality of religion in the way it structures the mundane and vivid cultural manifestations, “a deeply religious society” has become a preferred designation for its inhabitants (Hearn, 2006 p. 53; Mohammed, 2012, p. xvi; Molvaer, 1995, p. 68; Teshale, 1995, p. xvi; Young, 2006, p. 176). It is thus no wonder that the established secular state cannot detach itself from religious institutions.

Ethiopia has never been fundamentally Christian in the sense that it outlawed the minorities or that the EOTC was the dominant expression at every corner. In fact, the land has been in its history a breeding ground for traditional folk religions and the three monotheistic faiths, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The monotheistic religions of Ethiopia, despite being universal, are also distinctively marked in their practices by their coreligionists’ features. As Kaplan (1987, p. 107) argues, the monotheistic religions that crossed the borders of Ethiopia did not maintain entirely their original forms. The religions indeed have been contextualized, molded, and remolded, eventually emerging in a distinctively Ethiopian form, adding complexity to the fabric. Indeed, the country has
also been the setting for religious contacts, conflicts, and cross-fertilization. Mesfin (2003, p. 10) in a similar line remarks, “Judaism, Christianity, and Islam had each attempted at various times to replace Ethiopianness; all failed. Instead, each became Ethiopian.” For Mesfin, Ethiopianness is a distinct culture and to become an Ethiopian is to participate in it. As S. Kaplan (2014, p. 81) points out, the nation also offers a wider range of religious conversion phenomena of an ancient eastern Christian tradition, followed by Islam and eventually European-based forms of Christianity, including both Catholic and Protestant missions.

Even though Jews of Ethiopia share common practices with mainstream post-biblical Jewish practice, they omitted the Oral Law and the precepts of the Halachah, used Ge’ez, accepted the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and developed certain traditional practices that did not obtain normative status in Judaism (Spector, 2005, pp. 6-7). The EOTC is also quite distinct from the Christian West, as it is heavily influenced by Judaic elements (Pawlikowski, 1971-1972, p. 181). As Teshale (1995, p. 8) points out, the church is identified more by the tabot, the Ark of the Covenant, than the cross sign on the rooftop of its building. In a similar line, Fargher (1996, p. 10) also argues that the tabot has become the most important symbol in the Ethiopian church. Islam in Ethiopia also has its own features. Ethiopian Islam is characterized by decentralization, a closer association with ethnicity, incorporation of indigenous beliefs and practices, and peaceful coexistence of diverse Islamic jurisprudence and Sufi orders (Jon Abbink, 2007, pp. 67-71; Hearn, 2006 pp. 56-57).

### 3.6 Ethiopia and the Middle East: Alliance and Suspicions

According to Erlich (2013, p. 1) and Marcus (1994, pp. 3-5), the major aspects of Ethiopian culture are closely linked to the Middle East. In fact, the nation had close contact with the people of South Arabia, Egypt, and Israel since antiquity (Mikre-Sellassie, 2000, p. 302). The cultural resemblance comparison has in mind primarily the Amhara and the Tigray people. Notwithstanding Ethiopia’s long history of cultural intermixture and the resulting influence, the other non-Semitic Ethiopian nations and nationalities’ cultures in modern Ethiopia exhibit a tremendous level of diversity that might even be closer to the rest of Africa than the Middle East. The conjoining of Ethiopian culture with the Middle Eastern culture is also not without criticism.

Inherent to the criticism lies the uniqueness narrative of Ethiopia that divorces the nation from the rest of black Africa. According to Teshale (1996, pp. 414-417), the isolation image of Ethiopia from the rest of Africa effectively cuts the nation off from the outside world’s influence. The image is a typical view of the major protagonists of Western Ethiopianist discourse. Most critics conflate and at times mix the Christian identity of Ethiopia with a Semitic paradigm. In this line of criticism, the isolation paradigm is a historical invention. The utilities of the images are many, of which the rationalization of the defeat in the battle of Adwa, the nation’s strategic self-defense tactic in the
scramble for Africa, and a deceitful move to forge an alliance both with Africa and with the West are recurring themes.

For some, the depiction is a white man’s rationalization of the defeat at Adwa. In this narrative of conspiracy, the victory of Ethiopia stands as the representative of the black African while the defeated Italians represent the white Europeans. It follows, then, that the close association of Ethiopia with the Semitist is a scholarly invention to conceal the victory of black people. In this critique, the Semitist thesis is a defensive narrative that rationalizes the superiority of whites and belittles the fact that the savage black Africans successfully defended against colonial aggression in the battle of Adwa. Thus, the Semitist narrative is an external imposition and part of the hegemony of the Western world. Abiyi, quoted in Macleod (2014, p. 47), reasons:

Right after the battle of Adwa, this was problematic for the European psyche as well. How can a major European force be defeated by a bunch of savages? That cannot be. Well, it’s because these are not really savages, these are sub-divisions of the Caucasoid race; this is why they were able to do this. And so the notion of Ethiopia being in Africa, but not of Africa, the land of Prester John, surrounded by a sea of Islam, Ethiopians lay dormant for centuries oblivious to their surroundings, Ethiopia not having anything to do with black Africa, etc. was a resurgence of literature along those lines.

The thesis is solidarity with the rest of Africa. For the others, the link is more of Emperor Menelik II’s tactic in the wake of the scramble of Africa. It is thus a strategic image invented to protect the nation’s sovereignty from the scramble of Africa and to participate in it as an equal with the rest of the West. The image is not an imposition but rather a self-serving description. The invented image is thus an internal project of Ethiopian rulers to protect their sovereignty. It is not the case, however, that all who hold this thesis look at it positively. For those nationalists who espouse a colonial thesis of the 19th century, the uniqueness narrative signifies an internal project of maintaining sovereignty rather a cunning strategy. This project is late in origin and relates to Haile Selassie and the Mengistu régime. In these two regimes, Ethiopian rulers used the uniqueness narrative as masks and performed well in the drama. They wore different masks based on the nature of the audiences, knowing that the two images were contradictory but self-serving. In this line Asafa (2009, p. 189) remarks:

The concept of Ethiopianism shifts back and forth between claims of a “Semitic” identity when appealing to the White, Christian, ethnocentric, occidental hegemonic power center and claims of an African identity when cultivating the support of sub-Saharan Africans and
the African Diaspora while, at the same time, ruthlessly suppressing the history and culture of non-Semitic Africans of the various colonized peoples, such as Oromos.

Notwithstanding the values of the above debates, there are indisputable facts. The pre-Christian Aksumite Ethiopians knew both the deities and people of south Arabians (Insoll, 2003, pp. 39-40; Phillipson, 2012, p. 84; Tekletsadek, 1990a, p. 224). The nation’s politics, economy, and religion were also connected to the Middle East (Rubenson, 2009, p. 118). Egyptian Pharaohs also secured their demand for myrrh, ivory, and gold from the land (R. Pankhurst, 1997, pp. 3-4; R. Pankhurst & Gérard, 1996, pp. 1-2). Marcus (1994, p. 5) remarks that Ethiopia joined the Middle East from the ancient past, at least ideologically, and participated in the region’s rich religious depository of history. The historical connection with the Middle East is true of both Ethiopian Christianity and Ethiopian Islam. From the fourth to the early 20th century, all of the EOTC’s metropolitan bishops were Egyptian monks appointed from the Alexandrian church. The claim of the Jabarti as descendants of the first Muslim refugees and that of some present-day Oromo clans of having an Arab origin also indicate the significance of the region in the national life (A. Hussien, 2001, pp. 60-61; Østebø, 2011, p. 58).

The political theology of the Solomonic dynasty and the Zagwe dynasty also claimed their legitimacy to the throne through invented genealogical claims. Despite the historical nature of the claim, the myth somehow indicates the influence of the Middle East. First Kings Chapter 10 of the Old Testament of the Bible through the exposition of Kəbrä Nəgäst made the connection between Israel and Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Falashas (Ethiopian Jews), most of whom were repatriated to Israel in 1991, added weight to the connection. Historical sources attest to Jewish religious practices in the nation since early times, before the advent of Christianity. The EOTC from the earliest time to the present continues to observe the Jewish Sabbath, dietary prescriptions, ritual cleanness, the three-fold division of churches in imitation of the temple in Jerusalem, and the practice of circumcision on the eighth day (Amaletech, 2005, p. 187; Kaplan, 1987, p. 107; 1993, p. 647; Mikre-Sellassie, 2000, pp. 303-305).

Owing to the stronger political, economic, and religious ties with Egypt and the Arabian peninsula in the years before the 19th century, Ethiopia was considered part of the Middle East (Rubenson, 2009, p. 118). In fact, it was only with the formation of the Africa Bureau in August 1958 that Ethiopia was moved from the Office for African Affairs under the area of political responsibility in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) of the United States (Lefebvre, 2012, p. 706; Peter J Schraeder, 1994, p. 120; Peter J. Schraeder, 2009, p. 249). Similar to the US classification, in his speech to the US Congress, Emperor Haile Selassie referred to his country as “the largest Christian nation in the Middle East.” The first generations of Ethiopians scholars saw their work chiefly as a branch of Semitic studies and considered knowledge of Arabic and Syriac the
right foundation for the study of Ethiopian culture (Levine, 2000, p. 17). These all are evidence that the nation has strong historical, political, and economic ties with the Middle East.

Geographically separated only by the Red Sea, Ethiopia was the closest neighbor of Arabs (Levtzion, 1999, p. 501). Besides proximity, the two are also closely interconnected through their related languages, cultures, and long-distance trades (Sundkler & Steed, 2000, p. 35). There were also historical times in which the Ethiopian ruler invaded Southern Arabia, a territory endowed with the riches of urban-sustaining agriculture and a flourishing trade route for spice and silk. The two prolonged periods in which Ethiopia invaded and ruled Southern Arabia (Yemen) were from 335-370 BC and 525-575 BC (Gomez, 2005, p. 46; A. G. Solomon & Wudu, 2014, pp. 7-8).

The 525 invasion of Yemen, at the request of Emperor Justin I, was an avenging expedition of the Aksumite king Caleb. The persecution of Yemenite coreligionist Christians in Nadjrän by a Jewish Himyarite king was part of the story. The outweighing economic side of the story was to overthrow the pro-Persian state and take control of the spice and silk markets of India from Persians. The year of the defeat of the Ethiopian army expedition also marks the year of birth of the prophet Muhammad (Talib, 1990, pp. 705-707). The military expedition and the accompanying victory led to the recognition of the king as a saint, named St. Elesbaan, both by the EOTC and the Catholics (B. Girma, 2011, p. 149).

Ethiopia’s relationship with Saudi Arabia during Haile Selassie’s state was not positive. This was counterintuitive. Both were pro-Western, conservative, and monarchical. Their approach to each other was that of suspicion. Two reasons might explain the negative relationship. The first pertained to Saudi Arabia’s interest in Somalia in relation to access to the Red Sea, through which it gets foreign goods. Its ally Somalia was in a territorial conflict with Ethiopia about the Ogaden Plateau. For its economic interest in the Horn, then, Saudi Arabia stood in opposition to Ethiopia. Somalia was also a member of the Arab League. Second, there is also a religious side. The perception of Saudi Arabia towards Ethiopia was as a nation where Ethiopian Muslims are treated negatively. As a result, it supported the Eritrean Liberation Force (ELF). The perception in Ethiopia towards Saudi Arabia was thus that of an enemy who supported rebellious forces with a secessionist agenda. At the time of the Derg, the situation worsened as Ethiopia sided with the Soviet Union. With the exception of the Yom Kippur war, when Ethiopia broke the diplomatic relationship, Ethiopia also allied with Israel and there were both military and intelligence links between the two countries (Erlich, 2002, pp. 161-162; Quandt, 1981, pp. 44-45).
3.7 Christianity in Ethiopia

In the following three sub-sections that revisit the history of Christianity in Ethiopia, I look into how Christianity was introduced into Ethiopia, how it expanded, and how it become a primary image that the Christian monarchs identified with. More specifically I highlight the formative periods (3.7.1) in the Aksumite kingdom, the Zagwe dynasty (3.7.2), and the Solomonic kingdom (3.7.3).

3.7.1 Formative periods

EOTC’s dates its origin to 34 AD, the Ethiopian Eunuch in the book of Acts (Acts 8:26-29) and the evangelization of the apostle Matthew (An, 2015, p. 86). Historians generally regard the first century evangelization of Matthew as speculative (Binns, 2013, p. 34). Some scholars agree with the possibility of the first century origin of the EOTC given the nation’s proximity and contact to the Mediterranean world. The significance of the first century origin of the church’s tradition is that the EOTC is ancient, historic, and apostolic.

There is not much debate about the fourth century introduction of Christianity as the official religion of the state of Aksum, which was the precursor of today’s Ethiopia (Kaplan, 2009, p. 293; R. Pankhurst & Ingrams, 1998, p. 24; Tekletsadek, 1981, p. 362; Toggia, 2011, p. 12; Trimingham, 1952, p. 22). Finneran (2007, p. 195) argues that Christianity in the fourth century was an urban Aksumite phenomenon and it does not appear to have greatly penetrated into the rural hinterlands. Keller (1991, p. 17) suggests that the relatively close trading links with the Roman Empire may have contributed to the adoption of Christianity as the official religion during the middle of the fourth century. Unlike Islam in Ethiopia, the reception of Christianity was first by the emperor and his court, and only later by the king’s subjects. Lee argues that numismatic evidence and the absence of Ethiopian clergy as an important synod in the Roman world are evidence for the gradual establishment rather than a sudden mass conversion (Lee, 2011, p. 79).

For Lee (2011, p. 78), however, the conversion of the Aksumite king Ezana is an indication that Christianity had begun to draw the attention of the masses. For most historians, Christianity did not enjoy a mass reception for many years and remained, at least for two additional centuries after the conversion of its first king, a feature of elite court culture. Moreover, because Christianity arrived at a comparatively early stage in the organization of the Aksumite state, it was quickly integrated and not viewed as an external import (Kaplan, 2009, p. 294). Since then the Ethiopian Church has been the center of Ethiopian religious, political, and cultural life. Whether by accident or by design, after that the EOTC enjoyed a unique privilege throughout the imperial regimes (Teferra, 2011, p. 130).

The Syrian missionaries that are known as the “nine saints,” from the fourth to the sixth centuries, succeeded in making Christianity into the central component of the identity of the Aksumite and their descendants, the Tigrayan and those just over the Mareb river in what became
The Ge’ez hagiographical evidence for the saints, however, came after the so-called Solomonic dynasty kings (1270 onwards) (Munro-Hay, 2005, p. 145). As Taddese (1972, p. 23) argues, before the advent of these clerics in Ethiopia, it seems that “the effective sphere of influence of the church was limited to a narrow corridor between Adulis and Aksum among the main caravan route.” Niccum (2014, p. 3), however, argues that literary and epigraphic evidence reveals a developed ecclesiastical structure in Ethiopia by the sixth century. To him, in the sixth century the nation was undoubtedly a Christian nation. Christianity was further institutionalized through the Coptic Church of Egypt (Erlich, 2013, p. 6).

By the sixth century, the whole Agäw area east of the Tekeze river was converted to Christianity during the Aksumite period (Taddesse, 1977, p. 111). Similarly, Levine (2000, p. 72) remarks that many of the Agäw were converted to Christianity either after the Beja invasion or before that (Levine, 2000, p. 72). Henze (2001, p. 57) contends the claim by indicating that there were large pockets of people that continued to adhere to traditional beliefs intermingled with Judaic practices by resisting Christian domination.

### 3.7.2 Pious but “illegitimate” dynasty

Although the Zagwe dynasty reigned from around AD 1137 to 1270 and left the astonishing rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, little is known about the period. The affairs of the dynasty are still an unsolved mystery. The dynasty produced no coinage, inscriptions, or apparently even chronicles (Shinn & Ofcansky, 2013, p. 433). What we know of it is that its kings were devoted Christians who believed that they were commanded by God to build a replica of Jerusalem. As a result, they built many new churches and monasteries. By the time of the Zagwe, the Ethiopian church was showing the effects of long centuries of isolation from the rest of the Christian world since the seventh century. The Zagwe dynasty was mainly interested in religious pursuits. It did not share its predecessor’s expeditionary zeal and political astuteness (Teffera, 2011, p. 5).

From the very outset, however, the dynasty suffered a legitimacy deficit. In the year 1150, the Coptic patriarch received a request from the king of Ethiopia to replace the Ethiopian abunä Michael as head of the church, for he had refused to recognize the legitimacy of the king’s rule. It is suspected that the new king was, in fact, the founder of the new dynasty (Huntingford, 1965, pp. 8-9; Irvin, 2001, pp. 113-114; Taddesse, 1977, p. 123; Tringham, 1952, p. 56). The opposition of the church was disarmed, however, by intensifying missionary propaganda among the Agäw and building churches and monasteries (Tringham, 1952, p. 56). For almost 85 years, the EOTC survived without a bishop (B. Girma, 2011, p. 158). With the exception of the first rulers, this dynasty is almost entirely represented by “kings-as-saint” based on their recollection of their merits and good services towards the church and clergy (Bausi, 2013, p. 171).
The rulers of the new dynasty sought legitimacy by creating the myth that they descended from Moses and Aaron, who, according to local and biblical tradition, was married to an Ethiopian wife while he was in Egypt (Munro-Hay, 2002, p. 22; 2006, p. 186). The other competing narrative for the legitimacy of the new rulers was that the first king was the son-in-law of the last of the old imperial line or the descendants of a liaison between Solomon and one of the queen’s retainers (Kaplan, 2009, p. 296; Munro-Hay, 2002, p. 22). During their own time, the Zagwe suffered from a lack of legitimacy among the Aksum ancient monasteries. The dynasty was considered to be usurpers, though ironically individual rulers of this so-called illegitimate dynasty were recognized also as saintly figures, namely Yǝmrǝḥannä Krǝstos, Lalibäla (Gäbrä Mäsqäl), Mäsqäl kəbra, and Näkkwəto Lää'b (Derat, 2003, p. 561).

3.7.3 The “legitimate” Solomonic dynasty

Yekuno Amlak (1268-1283), whose baptismal name is Tesfa Yesus (Hope of Jesus), conquered and killed the last Zagwe king. His accession in 1270 allegedly connected his lineage directly from the last Aksumite ruler Dil Naod. The killing of the last king of Zagwe was interpreted as the old legitimate dynasty, whose ancestor is Solomon, regaining the throne from the usurping Zagwe dynasty (Henze, 2001, p. 58; Witakowski & Balicka-Witakowska, 2012, p. 220). To curb the considerable resistance, he and his supporters began to circulate his descent from King Solomon and Makeda, Queen Shaba. He secured strong support from local clerics in return for giving semi-independent status to the church (Marcus, 1994, pp. 15-16). The ground of the support of the church was not altruistic. As a reward for the support, the church secured economic and political privileges. The treaty the king concluded with Täklä Haymanot inaugurated the year of concordat, where the kings practiced provision of a third of the land to the church (Bartnicki & Mantel-NeČko, 1969-1970, pp. 6-7). Huntingford (1965, pp. 1-3), however, argues that the involvement of Täklä Haymanot in politics began much later in the 17th century in retrospect through the political influence of the successive holders of the office of Éccäge, the administrative head of the church who is a native Ethiopian appointed by the emperor.

As Mohammed (2011, p. 391) succinctly puts it, the Ethiopian imperial regimes under the Solomonic dynasty “claimed a political theology that portrayed its leaders as the divinely appointed heirs of King Solomon, and the nation as a new Israel.” The 14th century Kəbrä Nāğäst is greatly accredited for the formation of such an attitude both in the EOTC and the Ethiopian political leaders (Messay, 2008, p. 391; Mohammed, 2011, p. 391; R. Pankhurst & Gérard, 1996, pp. 5-6). As Munro-Hay (2006, p. 182) notes, “… the final version of the royal myth of Ethiopia, written in the Kəbrä Nāğäst, assumed a quasi-biblical status among Christians in that country… It was not just read and copied but believed and venerated.” The political theology of the monarchs becomes evident if we
look at the official designation of Haile Selassie, who claimed a direct lineage from the legend. His title was "By the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, King of Kings of Ethiopia, and Elect of God."

According to Ethiopic tradition, the queen of Ethiopia, named Makeda, visited Solomon in the 10th century BC (1 Kings 10:1-13). Her visit to Jerusalem was to observe and learn from the wise and beneficent rule of King Solomon, as she had little experience in government. Upon her visit, tricked by King Solomon, she conceived a son, named Menelik I. Later, Menelik I was brought back to Jerusalem to be educated. Upon completion of his education, he insisted on returning despite his father wishing him to remain in Jerusalem. Upon his return, following the divine decree, he brought the Ark of the Covenant secretly from the temple. The Ethiopic tradition maintains that the Ark of the Covenant is still in Aksum. That is why the legitimate descendants should trace their lineage to Menelik I. After the Zagwe interlude (1137-1270), Yekuno Amlak restored the Solomonic dynasty line and it continued until 1974, with the last representative of the Solomonic dynasty being Haile Selassie I (1930-1974) (Marcus, 1994, pp. 17-18; Negussie, 2010, pp. 18-19; Witakowski & Balicka-Witakowska, 2012, pp. 220-221).

The last emperor, Haile Selassie, made two important imprints on the nature of the church. Not only did he diplomatically negotiate with the Coptic Church of Alexandria the autocephalous status for the church, but he also bestowed upon the church the status of a state religion. Through Article 2 of the revised Ethiopian constitution of 1955, what was claimed by the Solomonic dynasty was institutionalized. The constitution affirmed that the Solomonic dynasty descended from Menelik I, who was born from Makeda, the queen of Ethiopia, and Solomon, the king of Israel (Marcus, 1994, pp. 17-18).

In the sub-sections that revisited the history of Christianity in Ethiopia, I indicated that even if Christianity began from the royal court, its expansion was gradual. Progressively, however, Christianity has become the primary image of the Aksumite kingdom. The Zagwe dynasty also sustained the same Christian image, more so by contributing kings that are considered as saints, despite the fact that they are painted as illegitimate heirs. In the Solomonic kingdom, the symbiotic relationship between the Ethiopian king and EOTC churches was forged, given that the earlier provided protection for its expansion while the latter provided religious legitimacy. The result was the marginalization of Muslim communities from the political landscape.
3.8 Islam in Ethiopia

The history of Islam in Ethiopia dates back to the origin of Islam. The surveys of the available archeological and historical works, however, exhibit a shortage relative to the role Islam played in the country’s life and history (Crummey, 1990, p. 118). Insoll (2003, p. 47) notes the shortage as an anomaly, given that Ethiopian Islam is still a fertile field for scholarly investigations. The nature of the available sources is also far from comprehensive, thus limiting our understanding to revolve around a few sets of historical themes (Kapteijns, 2000, p. 227). As a result, what follows is a brief survey of scholarly works of Islam in Ethiopia. More specifically, the image of Ethiopians in Islam’s formative periods (3.8.1), its expansion in Ethiopia (3.8.2), and demographic and religious characteristics (3.8.3) are the points of focus.

3.8.1 The Ethiopians in Islam’s formative periods

Ethiopians were not new to the Arabs, the founders of Islam, before the introduction of the religion. After the rise of Islam, however, the relationship began to be characterized as relations between Christians and Muslims (Cerulli, 1998, p. 575). In the new characterization, Christian-Muslim relations, Ethiopia holds a special place in Africa (Jon Abbink, 2003, p. 2; Dereje, 2012, p. 1897; Erlich, 1994, pp. 5-10; 2006, p. 234). Erlich (2013, p. 5) thus points to Ethiopia as Islam’s first experience of foreign relations. Part of the formative images of Ethiopia derives from the Ethiopian ancestry of prominent Islamic figures, the first Hijrah to the nation, and the cordial relationship between the two.

According to Islamic tradition, Ethiopians were one of the first few foreign converts. The Ethiopian Bilal Ibn Rabah, the second male convert to Islam, was Islam’s first Muezzin when the concept of adhan (or azan) was introduced. In Islamic chronicles, there is a report that he remained a faithful follower despite the inhuman treatment of his master following his conversion to Islam. Umm Ayman Baraka, the prophet’s caretaker from childhood, was also one of the household members who converted to Islam before Muhammad’s prophethood become public (Jon Abbink, 2007, p. 67; Dereje, 2012, p. 1897; Desplat & Østebø, 2013, pp. 7-8; Erlich, 1994, pp. 5-9; 2007, p. 30). Islamic tradition also reports that Muhammad used to call Umm Ayman “Mother” as a sign of affection. He freed her upon marrying Khadijah and received her as family when she became a widow. He also remarked about her, “He that would marry a woman of the people of Paradise, let him marry Umm Ayman” (Beyer, 2007, pp. 38-39).

The prominent figures of the earlier Islamic period also had Ethiopian women among their ancestries. The caliph `Umar’s father, al-Khattab, had an Ethiopian mother. The great general `Amr Ibn al-`As, the conqueror of Egypt and one of the architects of the Arab empire, also had Ethiopian ancestry (Lewis, 2001, p. 252). The contact between Ethiopia and Islam is likewise graphically
reflected in the Quran, which contains a number of Ge’ez loanwords (R. Pankhurst & Gérard, 1996, p. 4). Young Ethiopian men and women were also sought greatly in Arabia, the men for warlike qualities and loyalties and the females for concubines (Danermark, 2002, p. 7).

In Islamic chronicles, the portrayal of Ethiopia is that of adoration, a safe haven when the first followers of Muhammad faced persecution from fellow citizens. The asylum seekers were led by Uthman bin Affan, who much later became the Third Caliph of Islam after the death of the prophet Muhammad (Braukämper, 2004, p. 4; R. Pankhurst & Ingrams, 1998, p. 10; Tekletsadek, 1990b, p. 560;Trimingham, 1952, pp. 44-45). The significance of the first migration is evident in the fact that the Hadith often refers to these events as the “First Hijrah to Abyssinia” (Robinson, 2004, p. 111).

The hospitality of the Aksumite kingdom and many other positive traditions engrained the formative periods of Islam to harbor a positive attitude towards Ethiopians. Such a positive attitude is evident in notable traditions. One of the traditions asserts, “Whoever brings an Ethiopian man or an Ethiopian woman into his house brings the blessing of God there.” The other is “Leave the Abyssinians alone so long as they do not take the offensive.” Consistent with the affection of the prophet Muhammad for the people, there are also some small works of Arabic literature that extoll the virtue of “the Ethiopians” (Jon Abbink, 1998, pp. 579-580; Brunson & Rashidy, 1992; Cerulli, 1998, pp. 279-280; Erlich, 1994, p. 10). The unique quality of Ethiopians as brave warriors is also part of the narrative of contemporary Muslim activists in Ethiopia.

Many also credit the “Leave the Abyssinians alone” hadith in explaining why Ethiopia was never subjected to external Islamic invasion despite its close proximity to Islam’s geographical homeland (Carmichael, 2004, p. 219; Robinson, 2004, p. 112). In this line of argument, the exemption of Ethiopia in reciprocity for the provision of sanctuary to the first asylum seekers. The historical exemptions of Ethiopia from Islamic jihad, however, also have an economic reason. After the 17th century, Aksum was in a state of decline and was not as attractive as the Middle East, to which the attention of the Islamic conquerors was directed (Jon Abbink, 1998, p. 111). Khadduri (2007, p. 256) provides two additional explanations for the exemption of Ethiopia from Islamic invasion: the conversion of the king and the nation’s geographical difficulty. According to Islamic tradition, the Aksumite king Nāgaśi not only received the asylum seekers but also later responded positively to the invitation to Islam through the letter of prophet Muhammad with the intent to spare his people. Taddese (1972, p. 34) attributes the creation of such traditions to the affection of Muhammad for the king and the prayer he heard upon his death.

A. Hussien (2007, p. 263) considers that the prevailing skepticism of the Christian writers and Western scholars is “partly because the idea of the king embracing Islam contradicted with the notion of Ethiopia’s exclusive identification with Christianity.” For Majid Khadduri, the most
compelling reason for the exemption is the physical characteristics of the nation. His argument is based on Islamic sources (2007, p. 256):

In the glosses on Suyuti’s commentary on a hadith in which Muhammad warned against an attack on Ethiopia, Abū al-Hasan Muhammed ibn ‘Abd al-Hadi said that the reason for Muhammad’s warning against an attack on Ethiopia was “Ethiopia’s roughness and the mountains and rugged valley and seas that lie between it and the Muslims.”

Due to the hospitality of its kings to the first Islamic refugees, the nation is depicted as a “land of neutrality” or dar al-hiyad, categorically exempt from jihad (Appleyard, 2010, p. 120). According to Islamic tradition, in the field of the international relations of an Islamic polity, there are two more zones, namely dar al-Islam (land of Islam) and dar al-harb (land of war). The favorable attitude towards Ethiopians, however, did not last long and the rest of the historical relationship was far from a friendly characterization (Cerulli, 1998, p. 580). The conflict was not religious in nature but was mainly a deadly struggle for gaining the upper hand in the Red Sea. There was a commercial rivalry between the ancient Aksumite port of Adulis and the new port of Jeddah. The effect was skirmishes on the Red Sea. After the death of Muhammad, the clashes increased in intensity. Economic interests in the control of the Red Sea caused various armed clashes between Ethiopians and Arabians (Abbink, 1998, p. 111).

3.8.2 Expansion

Ethiopia was the first experience of Islam outside Arabia in the formative period of Islam. It was the first nation that welcomed Muslims, even before Medina. By now, Ethiopian Muslims account for 34% of the population and part of the national life. In order to systematically approach the question of Islamic expansion in Ethiopia, it is helpful to think of the earlier communities of Muslims in three distinct groups. The first are the asylum seekers, the earlier trading Muslim communities within Aksum as well as the major trade outlet of Dahlak, and Muslim principalities formed along the trade lines of Zeila. The refugees to Ethiopia returned, and one of them converted to Christianity and remained there (Robinson, 2004, p. 111). The second group of communities that adopted Islam were associated with trading centers within the Christian communities frequented by Muslim merchants. These communities conducted their trade under royal protection. This does not mean, however, that they enjoyed full freedom of worship or the right to proselytize (Kapteijns, 2000, p. 228). At the beginning of the early eighth century, “recently Islamized Arabs under the Umayyad caliphate (661-750) occupied the Dahlak islands off the Massawa coast and were thus one of the first East African regions to come under the influence of Islam” (Miran, 2005, p. 180). As the
zenith of the Aksumite kingdom started to decline, Islamic communities started to flourish. It was from the seventh century that Islamic communities were established first in the coastal towns, such as Massawa, Berbera, Mogadishu, and notably Zeila, and then in the inland town of Harar (Erlich, 2002, p. 36). The expanding and flourishing Muslim communities were decentralized in character (Hearn, 2006 p. 55).

The earlier coastal communities are assumed to have been of Arab or other non-African origin and over time “increasingly developed their Muslim characteristics and they also propagated Islam among the predominantly nomadic peoples in the lowlands who were their immediate neighbors” (Taddesse, 1977, p. 103). The new immigrants entered Ethiopia as individuals or families rather than as large, organized collectives (Hearn, 2006 p. 54).

Unlike Christianity, which expanded from the center to the periphery, the pattern of Islamic expansion was from the periphery towards the center in areas which were remote from any direct and effective control of the Aksumite state (A. Hussien, 2001, p. 33). Clearly, the impact of all the proselytizing effort was minimal until the 10th century, and the immediate hinterlands of both the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden remained pagan for a long period. These early communities were not that strong. As a result, neither the Christian kingdom nor the pagan interior felt threatened by them since they were tributary communities to the indigenous people (Taddesse, 1977, p. 103).

At the beginning of the 10th century, an independent establishment of Muslim principality materialized on the Dahlak islands. Throughout the long period since the early eighth century, the Dahlak islands do not seem to have been of much importance for the propagation of Islam in the Ethiopian interior. From Dahlak, Islam extended to the south and west of the Ethiopian plateau and various Muslim sultanates were formed, probably transforming the existing state organizations into Islamic states. Besides a rivalry to have hegemony over the other, they did not generally have a friendly relation with the state of Christian Ethiopia due to its expansionary policies (Cerulli, 1998, p. 579).

The third category of earlier communities of Muslims was a string of trade-based Muslim principalities along trade routes leading inland from Zeila. Zeila, an important port in the Gulf of Aden, played a much more significant role than Dahlak in the expansion of Islam in the south and Shoa province and the latter establishment of Muslim sultanates. The tradition of the sultanate of Shoa traces its origin back to the end of the ninth century, ascribing it to a ruling house of Arab origin from the time of Mahzumi Khalid b. Al-Walid. The dynasty, after continuous internal conflict among the different branches of the ruling house, was annexed in 1285 by the Kingdom of Ifat (Taddesse, 1972, pp. 124-125). Both provinces were practicing traditional religious beliefs, and the Christian kingdom and Muslim sultanates competed for political and economic domination. After the second half of the 10th century, three background factors increased the Muslim expansion. These are
the declining power of the kingdom in the interior after a devastating war with a pagan queen, the rise of an independent power in Egypt under Fatimid’s rule that provided protections for Muslims, and the revival of the Red Sea as a major channel of trade (Elfasi & Hrbek, 1990, p. 85).

As Erlich (2002, p. 36) remarks, unlike the unifying ethos of Ethiopian Christianity and of Middle Eastern Islam, with their accompanying language and traditions, the Islamic enterprise in the Horn failed to create political unity. Jon Abbink (1998, p. 112) similarly indicates that Arabic never was and never became an indigenous spoken language, and regional identities tended to be as important as religious identity. In the 13th century, there were Muslim communities in the Ethiopian highlands that traded under the protection of the Christian state. There were also a number of Muslim principalities along the trade routes from the coast to the Christian highlands and to the Rift Valley lakes to the south. By that time, many of the nomads of the Horn, such as the Afar and Somali, had become Muslims (Aspen, 2001, pp. 46-47; Kapteijns, 2000, pp. 228-229).

While merchants played a major role in the spread of Islam throughout Ethiopia, the role of merchants in the spread of Christianity was limited only to its formative years. Unlike Christianity, however, the connection between trade and Islam was far more durable and enduring. Indeed, many merchants played a primary role in the diffusion of the religion. Muslim traders, who moved freely throughout the Christian kingdom during most periods, often served as Islamic teachers too. Following the establishment of a Muslim community through Muslim traders, educated religious teachers usually arrived to meet the religious needs of the communities. Thus, one could speak of the spread of Muslims as prior to the spread of Islam. Consequently, conversion to Islam was often most prominent along trade routes and in commercial centers. Between the seventh and 16th centuries, the historical development of Islam in Ethiopia was restricted to certain states and principalities (Carmichael, 2004, p. 219).

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Islam also expanded both on a local and regional level. The expansion of Islam was partly because the Christian monarchy was beset by internal problems in certain regions and Muslim dynasties commanded political power. Besides the internally divided Christian kingdom, the expansion also enjoyed its impetus from both the 19th century reform movements and the mystical Sufi order (Hearn, 2006 p. 55). The Yäju chiefs of Wällo, who used to be followers of Islam, were politically active to the extent of imposing their authority on the puppet emperors of the period and successfully challenging their rival warlords. The dominant narrative of the second half of the 18th century was that the emperors in Gondar merely reigned; they did not rule. This period of history is known as the Zämänä Mäsafənt, or era of the princes (Aspen, 2001, p. 48). In the 18th and 19th centuries in Ethiopia, Islam started to play a significant role in the political and military history of the country and to exert some influence over the wider society. The influence is the result of the emergence of regionally based Muslim dynasties in north-central and southern
Ethiopia. In southwest Ethiopia, in the Gibe region, also five small Oromo monarchies emerged in the first half of the 19th century. The rulers were generally patrons of Muslim clerics and traders hailing from northern Ethiopia who encouraged the teaching of Islam in the royal courts and throughout their territory (A. Hussien, 2006 p. 7). The new vehicle for Islamization was Sufism, particularly in the form of orders that identified with Sunni orthodoxy and emphasized the importance of learning (Robinson, 2004, p. 116).

In the Gibe region of the 19th century, the rulers promoted the Islamization of their states by continually “welcoming Islamic scholars from different parts of north-east Africa.” In other Oromo-inhabited areas, the most active agents of Muslim diffusion were the Wara Kallu (Oromo: priests). In this context, one should note the role of religious brotherhoods. Although some commentators on Ethiopian Islam have discounted the importance of brotherhoods, recent studies have begun to revise this picture. According to Mohammed Hassen, “The establishment of the Qaadiriya and other orders in the Gibe region in the 19th century was the key to the spread of Islam among the people” (Kaplan, 2004, pp. 377-378).

Hussein Ahmed’s book on Islam in Wällo documents the decisive role played by brotherhoods in both the establishment and revival of Islam in the region. He also argued very well that the success of Islam is the result of myriad factors. Among these he singled out as the most important factors the role of the indigenous Muslim clerics and scholars, the advent of immigrant families from the Hejaz and Yemen, the periodic arrival of a larger group of Muslims in the wake of political and military conflicts in the Islamic heartland, and the slow infiltration of other Muslim elements (A. Hussien, 2001, p. 30). Abraham (1969, pp. 50-51) suggests also that the rapid early expansion of Islam does not seem to have aroused the concern or interest of the Ethiopian Christians perhaps mainly because it affected primarily the lowland periphery rather than the northwestern highland massif, which was the natural habitat of the Christians.

3.8.3 Diversification and indigenization

Despite Ethiopia’s connection with the formative periods of Islam, neither Islamic practices nor Muslims in Ethiopia are monolithic. Muslims in Ethiopia are diverse both in their ethno-linguistic backgrounds and in practice, acquiring a strong indigenous character (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, pp. 7-8; Hearn, 2006 p. 56). The demographic and geographic dispersal is not without implication, both in the present and in the past. It hindered the creation of a national Muslim consciousness (Hearn, 2006 p. 54). Ethnic populations that are almost entirely Muslims include the Somali, the Afar, and the Harari. Spatially, their concentration is along the southern, eastern, and western peripheries. Even if an identification of some ethnic groups is possible with some ethnicities, the same does not hold true for the rest of the ethnicities. For example, half of the Oromo population is Muslim, while the rest
are Christians. All the rest of the ethnicities, with the exception of western Nilotic, are internally diverse and have Muslim minorities among them.

Historically, the Muslim sultanates of Ethiopia had also Islamic centers, none of which – with the exception of Harar – were sustained into modern Ethiopia. The coastal towns like Zeila and Massawa had Islamic centers besides Harar and Gonder. From the 13th century onwards, the demand for Ethiopian `ulama was filled mainly in Egypt, with the exception of a few who had studied in the Arabian peninsula. The Muslims of Ethiopia practiced a local form of popular Islam with occasional elements of orthodoxy. In the 19th century, Wällo had also developed strong Islamic institutions and a Muslim education system. With the fall of the sultanates, madrasahs continued to operate in individual communities as suppliers of Islamic religious education (Erlich, 2004, pp. 117-118; Lulat, 2005, p. 59).

As Ethiopian Muslims continued to advance into new frontiers, they incorporated “indigenous, pre-Islamic beliefs and practices into their understanding and practice of Sunni Islam.” The result was regional variation reflecting localized adaptation of tribal, Semitic, and Cushitic cultures (Hearn, 2006 p. 56). As Abbink (2007, p. 67) remarks, Islam in Ethiopia is marked by a preponderance of, and great respect for, “saints” (walis), shrines (tombs), mystics, and panegyrists.

Ethiopian Islam is also the home of three of the four canonical schools of Islamic jurisprudence and several major mystical orders. This stand is diametrically opposite to the other, usually “mono-legal” region of sub-Saharan Africa and testifies to the diversity already remarked upon for many aspects of culture and the environment in Ethiopia and the Horn (Insoll, 2003, p. 39). Of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence, in the order of adherents, the Shafi, the Hanafi, and the Maliki are present and the first two were mainly introduced through travelers from Hijaz and Yemen, while the Maliki arrived through Sudan (Hearn, 2006 p. 56; A. Hussien, 2001, pp. 64-66). A number of Sufi orders are also found in Ethiopia. Qadiriya is the oldest, and the majority were introduced during the 16th century in the city of Harar. Other orders arrived during or after the 18th century, including the Ahmadiyya, Mirghaniyya, Sammaniyya, and Tijaniyya. Orders that have few followers include the Haddadiyya, Rifaiyya, and Shadhiliyya (Hearn, 2006 p. 56; A. Hussien, 2001, pp. 68-71). It must be noted that membership in these orders is not formal, but rather it is an informal association. As a result, many would describe Ethiopian Muslims as Sunni and Sufi.

Despite the varieties, there is absence of intense rivalry and clashes among the propagators and followers of each mystical tradition. The coexistence of the many orders, among others, is primarily explained by the fact that the orders were mainly disseminated through local scholars who were familiar with the prevailing local customs and tradition and thus in a position to explore and create favorable conditions in which the orders could flourish (A. Hussien, 2001, p. 78).
added that the peace might have resulted from the fact that the different orders occupy differing religious spaces of dominance.

In revisiting the history of Ethiopian Islam, I indicated that the formative images of Ethiopia among Arabs are largely positive and derive from the Ethiopian ancestry of prominent Islamic figures, the first Hijrah to the nation, and the cordial relationship between the two. I also noted that for the expansion of Ethiopian Islam, traders played a significant role as indigenous Muslims clerics and scholars accompanied them to propagate Islam. The advent of immigrant families, the periodic arrival of yet larger groups of Muslims in the wake of political and military conflicts in the Islamic heartland, and the slow infiltration of other Muslim elements were all vital to the diffusion of Islam in Ethiopia. As Ethiopian Islam continued to advance into new frontiers, its diversity and decentralization increased. It also incorporated indigenous, pre-Islamic beliefs and practices.

3.9 Christian Kingdom and Muslim Sultanates

In the following three sub-sections, I depict the historical reactions of the Christian kingdom and Muslim sultanates. In doing so, I emphasize that the skirmishes on the Red Sea were the primary reason for historic conflictual encounters and alliances (3.9.1). The weakening of the Aksumite kingdom also gave an opportunity for the creation of the Muslim sultanates that challenged the Christian kingdom (3.9.2). The restoration of the “Solomonic dynasty” reaffirmed the dominance of the Christian kingdom, except a few historical episodes, and the Muslim communities remained subservient to the Christian kingdom (3.9.3).

3.9.1 Skirmishes on the Red Sea

The sixth century apex of the glory days of the Aksumite kingdom, its regional influence on the Red Sea trade, and its magnificent prosperity came to an abrupt end in the late seventh century. The decline was the product of myriad factors, changes in climatic condition, environmental over-exploitation and degradation, and loss of access to international trade routes that connect to North-Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean. The cutting down of timber, its increasing population, and over-exploitation of soils decreased productivity (Michael, 2013, p. 6). At the end of the sixth century, Persians drove the kingdom from Yemen and from its possessions along the western shore of the Red Sea.

In response to the expansionist pressure exerted by Muslim Arabs from Egypt, the Beja moved south in large numbers during the late seventh and eighth centuries. As the result, the kingdom of Aksum lost most of the territory it controlled in the north (Levine, 2000, pp. 70-71; Tekletsadek, 1990b, pp. 563-564). The expansion of Islamic power in the Near East and the Middle East was not without consequence. Indeed, it damaged the economic life of the kingdom, as evidenced in “the
weakening of the central institutions and the political disintegration that followed for a period of over two centuries” (Taddesse, 1977, p. 105). Many Ethiopians thus relate the declining power of the Aksumite kingdom to Islamic expansion. The period of Ethiopian history between the decline of Aksum and the late 13th century is particularly obscure. It is widely accepted that, with its decline, Aksum ceased to be a political capital, although it continued as a religious center (Heclo, 2007, p. 16).

3.9.2 A weakened Christian dynasty and strengthened Islamic sultanates

In 1137, a new dynasty, Zagwe, took over the state of Ethiopia. They originated from Bugna in the Lasta region, south of Tigray, with its capital Adafa (later called Roha and Lalibela). The Zagwe were of Agäw ethnic origin, Cushitic speakers, and the original inhabitants of extensive regions south of Aksum. They established a power base at Debre Libanos, South of Senafe (Munro-Hay, 2006, p. 75). The dynasty failed adequately to control vital trade routes in the south. They were further weakened by internal divisions, particularly succession struggles (Cohen, 2009, p. 3).

Trimingham (1952, p. 57) aptly describes the limited sphere of influence of the dynasty by saying, “The Zagwe rulers could hardly call themselves ‘kings of the kings of Ethiopia’ for the sphere of their rule was very circumscribed.” The limits of Zagwe power provided opportunities for Muslims on the coast to grow strong. This is evident in the fact that they established Muslim sultanates as far west as the lowland eastern finger of Shoa (Munro-Hay, 2002, p. 23). Muslim neighbors, who were active in trading with the coast, were a linkage to the wider world (Henze, 2001, pp. 58-59).

The Zagwe were also more aggressive in pursuing international trade. New commercial ties with Egypt and with other Muslim countries along the Red Sea were forged, and with this relationship, Ethiopian pilgrimages to the Holy Land increased. In 1189, Salah ad-Din turned over several churches in Jerusalem to the Ethiopians to provide services for their pilgrims to that city. A crucial development of the period was also that the Zagwe kings begun to look for strength outwards and to strengthen their communications with Egypt and Jerusalem. Ethiopians, as neutrals, attained favorable concessions from the new regime (Finneran, 2007, p. 23).

The Agäw dynasty was also Christian but lived in relative harmony with the Muslim principalities until it was overthrown in 1270 by Yekuno Amlak, an Amhara chieftain, who reestablished the “Solomonic” dynasty (Aspen, 2001, p. 46). Due to Zagwe weakness, the Islamic areas began to evolve into political entities. Since Zagwe times, Muslim leaders had sought to unite their jurisdiction into one large and powerful state to struggle for souls, terrain, and trade. During this period, since there was not a considerable expansion of the Christian kingdom that correlates with evangelization, there was not any appreciable evangelization carried out (Taddesse, 1972, p. 150).
3.9.3 Restoration of Solomonic dynasty and war against Muslim sultanates

The ascent of Yekuno Amlak (1270-1285) in 1270 marked the so-called Solomonic dynasty restoration. Behind his success were also two prominent monks, Iyyåsu Mo'a and Täklä Haymanot, who were involved in convincing the legitimate heir of the Zagwe dynasty, Na'akuto La'ab, to abdicate on the ground that the Zagwe rulers are usurpers. The monks in return negotiated land as a concession to the church, and the privilege of maintaining Etchaebet, Ethiopia’s senior monastic community, was bestowed upon Dabra-Libanos (Henze, 2001, pp. 58-60; Negussie, 2010, pp. 19-21). As the new emperor struggled for power, he forged an alliance with the Muslim sultanates of Ifat, had Muslim horsemen in his army, and had contact with the rulers of Yemen and Egypt (Taddesse, 1997, p. 172). Within his northern kingdom, there was an internal power struggle that occupied him in the campaign to establish the northern authority. His intent to secure a bishop from Alexandria also required an image of a Muslim protector. His letter sent to the Egyptian ruler Baybars, via a Muslim merchant emissary, explicitly said “he protected all the Muslims within his territories” (Danermark, 2002, p. 20).

The request for an abunä remained unheard. The refusal to send a bishop was partly because the new king took an immediate precautionary measure against the kingdom of Ifat (Trimingham, 1952, p. 69). His 15-year reign was also filled with difficulties with the aggressive Muslims of Ifat who were trying to expand onto the eastern edges of the plateau, but he seems to have been successful in holding them back and leaving a favorable position to his son and successor (Henze, 2001, p. 59). In desperation, he not only resorted to an implicit threat but also turned to Syria besides launching an offensive against Muslims. Baybars did not take the action lightly and in retaliation closed Jerusalem to Ethiopians, putting an end to pilgrimages. However, the appointment of a non-Egyptian abunä quickly backfired on the Ethiopian ruler, as the legitimacy of the Syrian abunä was questioned in all quarters (Erlich, 2002, p. 42).

His son, Solomon (1285-1294), also attempted to repair strained relations with neighboring Muslim principalities and again wrote to Egypt asking the sultan to have the patriarch of Alexandria send an abunä (Henze, 2001, p. 59). In the quest for legitimacy, the king’s immediate successors resorted to appeasement. His actions, however, were interpreted as a sign of weakness by Ifat and led to a renewed riding along the frontier (Marcus, 1994, p. 21). His letter sent to Egypt promised protection to Muslims through his kingdom and in reciprocity demanded protection of Christians in Egypt. According to Taddese (1972, p. 127), his letter included, “My father.. was an enemy of the Muslims… But as for me, I am not like my father at all in this respect; but I protect the Muslims in all the realms of my kingdom.” The result was the reopening of the roads to Jerusalem and the authorization of the appointment of a new abunä (Erlich, 2002, p. 42).
Muslim sultanates as tributary subjects

The first Solomonic king who took measures against the Muslim sultanates’ expansion was Emperor Amdā Šayon I (1314-1344). He becomes frustrated with Ifat’s continual raids and Cairo’s refusals to send an abunä. In 1316, the king annexed Ifat without much difficulty, plundering its capital and looting smaller Muslim principalities to the south and the east. He occupied the Muslim states of southern Ethiopia, i.e., the sultanates of Hadiya, Fatigar, Ifat and Dawaro. In the new arrangement, they became autonomous tribute-paying subjects (Marcus, 1994, p. 22).

The emperor also managed to extend Christianity among the pagans of those regions and among the Sidama people. As a sign of his conquest, Amda Seyon built churches and monasteries at the threshold of the pagans and Muslims’ lands. The main monasteries of this period are Debra Wagag of Asebot in the southeast of Ethiopia; Zugquala, the monastery of Gaber Za Menfas Qeddu; and Adadi Mariam, a famous Mariam shrine in the south. The economic and political subjugation substituted resentment and hatred in Muslim circles for the tolerance that had previously existed (Marcus, 1994; Munro-Hay, 2002, p. 24; Taddesse, 1997, p. 173). The emperor also took brutal measures against Muslims and burned their mosques (Quandt, 1981, p. 70). The destruction of the mosques was likely a reciprocating measure against Muslim rulers in Ethiopia and Egypt. Haqq al-Din invaded the ruler of Ifat and burned the church in 1328. At the same time the ruler of Egypt, Sultan al-Nassir, was also destroying the Coptic churches in Egypt (Erlich, 2002, pp. 42-43).

During the first decade, the priority of the imperial army was related to rebellions in Tigray, Damot, Dawaro, and Hadiya. During this time, the kingdom of Ifat took the initiative in organizing Muslim fronts, employing the prevailing dissatisfaction with Christian domination and heavy taxes. Sabradin, the ruler of Ifat, marched in 1332 against the Solomonic kingdom, construing it as a holy war. The result was devastating for the Christian kingdom, as the united Muslims successfully invaded its territory, destroyed its churches, and forced conversions to Islam. The retaliation of the Christian king was a bloody campaign against Ifat and its allies. Following their defeat, “the Muslims of Ifat called to Cairo for help, and not surprisingly, in 1337, abunä Yaqob found his way to Ethiopia” (Marcus, 1994, pp. 21-22). The king continued to fight with the seven Muslim states, defeating each one after the other (Quandt, 1981). The victory of Amda Seyon registered him among the saints in the Synaxarium (Iosifides, 2013, p. 602).

The successor of Amda Seyon, Nāwāyā Krāstos (1344-1372), is famous for his war against Egypt and for the oppressive steps taken by him against the Muslims of Ethiopia, as a warning to the sultans of Egypt who persecuted the Christians of Alexandria. Emperor Dawit I (1382-1411) concluded victoriously the struggles against the Muslims of Ifat conducted by Hag-ed-Din II and Saad-ed-Din II. Emperor Zara Yaqob (1433-1468), to stop the spreading of Islam and therefore to isolate the Ethiopian Christians from the Muslim and pagan contagion, made a proclamation that
obliged all Ethiopians to carry the engraved cross and other Christian signs on their forehead and on their arms (Ayele, 2000). He took the throne name Kwestantinos, as a mark of admiration for the Roman Emperor qʷastāntīnōs (Henze, 2001, p. 69). Based on these and similar actions, some advanced a thesis that the intention was to destroy Islamic states and that the failure of the project related to geographical reasons (Haberland, 1999, p. 712).

The emperor also transformed the lives of the EOTC and of its members through various initiatives, attempted to unite the church, and sought to increase Christians by promoting evangelization (Kaplan, 2014, p. 81). He also wrote a letter, upon the news of the destruction of a monastery of the Copts in Egypt, to Sultan al-Zahir Jaqmaq reminding him that he had Muslim subjects whom he treated fairly (Henze, 2001, p. 69). By about 1500, the Christian empire had politically, culturally, and indeed in every respect reached its height. Most of the Islamic states paid tribute, however unwillingly, to the Christian empire. Relationship by marriage between the ruling classes of the Christian empire and the Islamic border areas strengthened these contacts (Haberland, 1999, p. 705).

The rulers of Islamic sultanates paid tributes to the Ethiopian kings, who since ancient times had claimed sovereignty over the lands up to the coast. Whenever the sultanates refused to pay, violent conflicts ensued. These conflicts marked the 14th and 15th centuries, with the Christian empire usually emerging as the winner. Shinn (2002, p. 1), in this line, remarks, “Ethiopia’s Christian rulers left no doubt, however, that Islam would be subservient to Christianity.” The Christian-Islamic relations, even if not based on symmetrical power relations, remained generally cordial until the 15th century (Jon Abbink, 1998, pp. 113-114).

**Short-lived success of Muslim sultanates**

After Zara Yaqob in the reign of Bäʿādā Maryam (1468-1478), the Muslim states of southern and western Ethiopia were so reinforced that in 1471 they joined together. They inflicted the first defeat of the imperial army. It was the beginning of the advance of Islam. Eskender (1478-1494), who succeeded his father Bäʿādā Maryam, had several encounters with the Muslims of Adal and died in Dancalia in an ambush warned by the Muslims. During the reign of Lēbnä Déngél (1508-1540), the centuries-old conflict between Christians and Muslims reached a very serious stage (Ayele, 2000).

The Christian expansion continued but faced a challenge from Islam in the southeast. From 1527, the Christian kingdom was under serious Muslim attack, led by the famous Imam of Harar, Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (or Ahmed Gragn, “the left-handed”), the leader of Adal (Aspen, 2001, p. 47). He succeeded in uniting all of southern Ethiopia under the banner of jihad (Erlich, 1994, p.
The progress of his successful campaign subjugated a vast area, Shoa in 1529, Amhara in 1531, and Tigray in 1535 (Erlich, 1994, p. 31; 2002, p. 48).

The attack was a serious Muslim challenge to Christian rule. He conquered most of the Ethiopian highlands, making them subject to Muslim rule. Gragn had allied himself with the Turks and received firearms carried by trained Turkish soldiers, and the army’s reinforcement with modern ambushes came from Arabia. Thus, the Muslim army of Adal caused great damage over the whole of Ethiopia, leaving the king a fugitive in the mountains. In the local traditions, the majority of the people accepted the faith as well as the yoke of the Muslims. The invasion was not halted until 1543, when Ahmed was defeated and killed in battle against the Christian army supported by a force of 400 Portuguese soldiers (Aspen, 2001, p. 47; Beckingham, 1994, pp. 87-88).

Not all the conversion of the 16th century into Islam, however, was resisted. Particularly in southern and eastern Ethiopia, Hadiya and Bale, the population welcomed them since they often shared their religion. Their reception was as liberators from the yoke of Christian rule. In the Christian highland, however, especially the regions inhabited by the Amhara and Tigray, the conversions were forceful. The Christians were given the choice of accepting Islam or being put to the sword. Most of the conversions as a result were nominal. Churches and monasteries also did not escape destruction and plunder (Haberland, 1999, p. 713).

During the latter half of the 16th century, however, Islam suffered another reversal in political fortunes, and the Christian monarchy regained its strength and sought to consolidate its own power by curbing that of Ethiopian Muslims (Hearn, 2006 p. 55). Gragn was also passionately interested in conversation. Innumerable Christians, as well as many followers of local traditional religions, particularly the southwest, embraced Islam. The image of Islam as the main enemy of Christianity was now engraved in their collective memory even if his supremacy was, however, short-lived. Lébnä Déngél succeeded in smuggling out an appeal for help (Erlich, 2002, p. 49). Erlich (1994, p. 31) argues that the experience was so significant for Ethiopian Christians that he coined the term Ahmed Gragn Syndrome. The syndrome led to the construction of a religious fault line, while the perception of Islam as a possible external threat.

With the death of Gragn, the Muslims of Adal lost a leader of great value but not the aspiration of conquering Ethiopia. Therefore, only one year after the killing of Gragn, his nephew tried to invade Wag. Another nephew invaded the southern regions of the Ethiopian state, succeeding, in the battle of March 23, 1559, in killing the Emperor Gälawdewos. Nevertheless, the emperor Śärșā Dəngel or Málik Säğiäd (1563-1597) broke any attempts of recovery by the Muslim army, capturing and killing in 1576 Sultan Mohammed ben Osman, who had invaded Bale. The progress of Islam after the expulsions of the Jesuits missionaries became very alarming during the reign of Yohannes I (1667-1682) (Haberland, 1999, pp. 721-723). Facing this danger, in 1630 he published an edict
ordering that the Muslims be isolated from the Christians, that is to live in quarters separated from the rest of the community and be considered among the inferior castes of the country. This edict came into effect immediately in Gondar, Aksum, and in several other towns of the empire. In comparison with Catholics, Muslims were allowed to practice their religion freely in their separate settlements (Haberland, 1999, pp. 731-732).

The remarkable influence of a handful of Portuguese missionaries won an increasing number of converts to the Catholic faith, including even Emperor Susenyos, who in 1630 embraced the new faith and raised it to the status of the official religion of the state. Civil wars of unprecedented violence swept over the enfeebled empire until eventually the foreign faith and its supporters were driven out by force (Haberland, 1999, p. 703). In 1632, the emperor was persuaded to restore the traditional faith and transfer power to his son, and he died soon afterward. The death of the king was followed by the immediate expulsion of the Jesuits from the country; those who stayed behind to minister to the Catholic remnant were executed, and Catholic practices were prescribed. Ethiopia entered into another period of isolation, one lasting some 200 years, and the emperors did not hesitate to cooperate with the traditional enemy, Islam, now represented by the Ottomans, in order to exclude any interloping European Christians (Beckingham, 1994, pp. 91-92).

Under Emperor Yohannes I, (1667-1682) Muslims in imperial Ethiopia were forced to live like foreigners in quarters or villages of their own and were not allowed to own land. Christians would greet Muslims with their left hand only and refuse to share both meat and water with them. Emperor Yohannes I thus wanted to limit interaction between Muslims and Christians in the aftermath of the jihad of Imam Ahmad and the ongoing threat of an Ottoman intervention. Also, he tried to confine the Ethiopia’s Muslim population, which according to Portuguese sources, had grown to about one-third of the Ethiopian imperial population by 1630 (Loimeier, 2013, p. 180).

The Christian kings as ceremonial figureheads

There is no consensus as to when the era of the princes began. What characterizes the Zämänä Mäsafant is that from Iyyāsu I, who reigned 1682-1706, up to Tēwodros II’s reign (1855), the power of the Solomonic kings in Gondar was continually and significantly in decline. In this period, also, the Muslims from Wällo were actively converting many adherents of traditional religion who lived in the peripheral regions of the empire. During the period, the kings at Gondar were merely ceremonial figureheads. For a long time, most scholars extended the thesis that the period exhibited “the disintegration of the state.” Shiferaw (1990, pp. 157-179), however, challenged this dominant historical interpretation by arguing and conclusively showing the Yāju Oromo lords’ prominence over other lords. Shiferaw (1990, pp. 158-159) remarks that “The ruling houses of Wällo and Wärä Himäno professed Islam while Wärä Seh had been Muslim before.” Notwithstanding their devotion
to Christianity, Wara Himäno continued to be a Muslim name, which showed that they did not give much respect to the sensibilities of the Christian lords.” The years between 1786 and 1853 thus signify the political administration of Wärä lords in the name of the Solomonic dynasty. The suzerain and vassal relationship was evident between the Wärä rulers and the regional governors.

Modern Ethiopia

Téwodros II (1855-1868) and Yohannes IV (1872-1889) unified the northern kingdom to Showa. Menelik (1889-1913) ushered in the modern Ethiopia (Asnake, 2013, p. 23; Teshale, 1995, p. 48). The late 19th century and early 20th century’s expansion tripled the nation in size, and the population at least doubled (McClellan, 1984, p. 657). The modern period of Ethiopia, marked by state centralization, is considered to have begun with Kassa Hailu’s reign (1855-1868). After defeating the prevailing warlords of Zämänä Mäsafent (the era of princes), he became emperor Téwodros II of modern Ethiopia. His coronation name was an indication of both his ambitions and predicaments. The name alludes to a prophecy incorporated in the Fékkare Iyäsus (the explications of Jesus), a popular apocryphal religious treatise that predicts the rise of Téwodros, in whose hand righteousness would abound and evil would come to an end (Henze, 2001, p. 133). The prophecy is also a sort of a shield from his detractors that he is not from the Solomonic dynasty (Hastings, 1994).

The unification campaign of Téwodros II made Christian identity its core and undermined regional autonomy (Kapteijns, 2000, p. 234). He set the unity of religion as a viable mode for the unification of Ethiopia. As Knobler (2006, p. 306) puts it, “His ultimate goal was the re-conquest of Jerusalem.” To him, Islam embodied the Egyptians and the Ottoman Empire. He, however, sought religious, commercial, and political alliances with the European powers he considered equal (Reid, 2013, p. 62). Consequently, the emperor ordered in 1856 the Muslim Oromo of Warra Himäno in Wällo to convert and rebuild churches or face expulsion (Miran, 2007, p. 206). Kassa Mercha’s earlier struggle with Muslim soldiers who menaced the northwestern frontier of the Christian kingdom significantly shaped both his religious and nationalist sentiment (Darkwah, 1969). At the time Egyptians, a province of the Ottoman Empire, were encroaching into Ethiopia from Sudan and Ottoman Turks were infiltrating slowly inland from Massawa and blocking Ethiopian trade through the Red Sea (Marcus, 1994, p. 69).

Despite his intent of modernity, Téwodros II continued to perceive the world in terms of a Christian and Muslim dichotomy. The theme of Christian solidarity against Egypt and the rest of the Muslim world runs through much of his foreign correspondence, and he expected that any warfare against the Ottomans should follow a unified Christian front. The overall attempt was, however, a means of bolstering his claim to legitimacy at home and gaining respectability as an equal among the “Christian” nations (Knobler, 2006, pp. 306-307). In the mid-19th century, Emperor Téwodros II
(1855-1868) issued a decree which ordered all Muslims to convert to Christianity or to leave the country (Loimeier, 2013, p. 181). Towards the end of his reign, he openly decreed in April 1864 that his Muslim subjects of Begemdir should embrace Christianity (Ahmad, 1989, pp. 449-450). Albeit not successful, he also embarked on campaigns against the Muslim Oromo towns and villages along the Red Sea coast (Jonas, 2011, p. 15).

The next emperor was Yohannes IV. He is considered as a devoted Christian who envisioned a united Christian Ethiopia. In his time, Egyptians were the main threats; they had already started incursions to the coastal area and intended to invade the core. In the year 1876, two decisive battles were fought in Gonder and Gura, where the Christian kingdom had become victorious. Yohannes regarded his war against the Muslim Egyptians as a holy crusade to preserve the Christian dignity of a free and united Ethiopia. He sought to establish religious uniformity within the EOTC and in society as a whole. He convened the Synod of Borumeda in Wállo not long after his second victory over the Egyptians and attempted to resolve whatever doctrinal disputes existed. The 1878 counsel of Borumeda also passed an edict against Muslims and the Oromo. Both were required to become Christians, and those who refused to do so were asked to leave the country. The attempt is also interpreted as avenging the blood of Ethiopians who were forced by the sword and fire of Ahmed Gragn (Abbas, 2014, p. 180).

According to Henze (2001, p. 150), “Christians, Muslims, and pagans were given two, three and five years respectively to conform. Muslim officials were given three months to renounce either their positions or their religion; pagan officials were to accept Christianity immediately.” In accordance with the edict, the mass conversion took place among Muslims and Oromos in both Shoa and Wállo. Yohannes made the leaders of various areas of the periphery contingent on the renunciation of Islam or other non-Christian regions and on their conversion to Christianity. Realizing that others, who would do the emperor’s bidding, could replace them, many of these leaders consented to conversion.

In the local collective memory, this historical episode is called “the era of the apostates” (yā-kāfāru zāmān) (Ficquet, 2006, p. 50). The brutal persecution and forced conversions of Muslims generated profound and lasting hostility among Muslims (Carmichael, 2004, p. 220).

According to A. Hussien (2002, p. 26), the injustice and the ruthlessness with which the edict was carried out led the Muslim communities to follow three coping strategies. First, a nominal conversion, where Muslims became Christians in daylight and practiced Islam at night based on the Islamic concept of taqiyya (dissimulation). Second, there was an exodus of a large number of people to Sudan and the Hijaz. Third, there were organized and armed rebellions led by Muslim religious leaders. In order to escape these policies, many Muslims emigrated to Harar, an old center of Islamic learning in the eastern highlands (Loimeier, 2013, p. 181).
Historical records also note that during this period the Muslims of Ethiopia were protected and encouraged from abroad – on the one hand, by the Turkish state, which controlled the countries facing the Red Sea, and by the Dervish of Sudan, who decided to eliminate Ethiopian Christianity. However, the clamorous victories of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) on those two fronts (against the Turks in the battles of Gudaguddi, Kesad Eqae Gura in 1875-1877, and against the Dervish at Matamma in March 1889) broke the advance of Islam and any hope of achieving domination in Ethiopia. Therefore, he obligated the Muslims of his kingdom to convert to the Orthodox Church, excluding from any office in the public administration those who were against it. He died on March 11, 1889, during the battle of Matamma, successfully defending his reign from the invasion of the Dervish (Ayele, 2000).

Despite his desire to Christianize his entire domain, Yohannes also took a calculated approach to religious conversion. For him, politics was primarily evident in the fact that he assigned some Muslims to his court. He considered Islam a threat, but in his mind, an even greater threat to the political survival of Ethiopia was European expansion. Yohannes even attempted to form an alliance with the Muslim Sudanese Mahdists against the potential European threat (Keller, 1991, p. 27). Thus, latter conflicts with the Khedive of Egypt in 1875, the 1888 forces of the Mahdi in the Sudan and the earlier 16th century Ibn Ahmed Ibrahim Al-Ghazi history mainly reflect “Christian-Muslim competition for control over the Ethiopian highlands rather than an early effort to impose Islamic fundamentalist rule” (Shinn, 2002, p. 1). Because of such periodic conflictual encounters, the chronicles of Ethiopia’s history tend to “ignore the indigenous character of Ethiopian Islam, portraying it instead as an alien and generally antagonistic force” (Hearn, 2006 p. 54). The unfairness of such a depiction is very evident as one notes that the two communities passed through centuries of peaceful coexistence (Asnake, 2013, p. 59).

Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913) did not pursue the policies of forced conversion. His approaches were more systematic and diplomatic. He attempted to integrate them via forging an alliance. As Abbas notes (2014, p. 180), “On the whole…Menelik’s conduct was relatively ambivalent and pragmatic.” In spite of his overt intention of Christianizing his subjects, the emperor decided to tolerate Islam in areas where religion was deeply rooted. Éloi (2006, p. 49) similarly remarks that Menelik’s approach was conciliatory. Despite the fact that the integration effort of Menelik was conciliatory, the task of defending his land from colonial aggression required Menelik to invoke the Christian image of Ethiopia as he corresponded to the western nations. Due to this, Rubenson (2009, pp. 117-125) argues that the imagery of Ethiopia by Menelik II as a “Christian island surrounded by a sea of pagan” is not an internal perception of Ethiopians but rather a strategic stance of resistance to the European ambitions to the conversion and colonialism. The distinct image of a Christian Ethiopia was thus a call to the Christian West to redirect their ambition to the
neighboring nations. Notwithstanding the diplomatic advantage of the notion of Christian Ethiopia, the notion also somehow indicates the internal perception of Ethiopians. As a result, his argument that the notion purely reflects the perspective of the Western vision is hard to sustain.

Rubenson’s assessment is likely correct in asserting that the letter’s specific intention is a shield against conquest but also somehow reflects the Ethiopian emperor’s perceptions. A. Hussien (2006 p. 8) succinctly summarized the notion. As he noted, Ethiopian history consistently exhibited the Christian-Muslim relations falling under strain whenever there was a perceived threat of foreign aggression. Historical examples involved the Turkish, Egyptian/Mahdists, and Italians (in the 16th/17th, 19th, and 20th centuries, respectively). In each of these cases, there is a deeply rooted suspicion of the Ethiopian state, the church, and the Christian population. They feared that the indigenous Muslims might cooperate with coreligionists or foreign aggressors. The triumph over the Italians at Adwa in 1896 won him undying fame in Africa and the African Diaspora and helped to diffuse the association of Ethiopia and Christianity through the world (Robinson, 2004, p. 108).

During the reign of Lej Iyyàsu (1913-16), Muslims gained recognition and became part of an integration policy into the nation-state projects. The young inheritor was the son of a Muslim lord of the Wällo region who converted to Christianity and was the grandson of Menelik II (Jon Abbink, 1998, p. 116). His approach towards Muslims both in Ethiopia and in neighboring countries, coupled with his character, however, was interpreted as a disestablishing force within the nobility and the church. His alliance with anti-European forces, Ottoman Turkey, and Germany, led to the coup that overthrew Iyyàsu in 1916 in which Britain and France played some role. In September 1916, Zawditu was appointed as Empress and Ras Täfäri Mekonen (the future Haile Selassie) as regent.

During the Italian occupation (1936-1941), the fascist state declared a pro-Islamic policy. In order to secure the loyalty of Muslims, they constructed new mosques, restored the old ones, subsidized the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, and allowed the teaching of Arabic in Islamic Schools. The restored monarch took a harsh measure against Muslim leaders by considering them traitors (A. Hussien, 2006 pp. 8-9). The restored monarch not only started to obstruct the public assemblies but also discouraged Islamic education and the speaking of Arabic at socio-political functions (Carmichael, 2004, p. 227). The initial measures were further strengthened when the state faced the rebellion of the Muslim Adare in 1948, the secessionist tendencies in the Ogaden, the widespread Arab support for Eritrean secession, the 1968 political problems among Bale Muslims, and the different wars against the Somali in the 1960s and 1970s (Wudu, 2012, p. 152). The siege mentality of Ethiopia is a sense of isolation from the rest of the world and encircled by hostile Muslim neighbors.

In creating the modern Ethiopia, the role of the EOTC cannot be underestimated. In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, the Amhara emperor Menelik II from the central prince of Shoa
incorporated the lands and peoples of the south, east, and west into an empire that become the modern state of Ethiopia. Quoting Abbas Haji and Mohammed Hassen, Abbink (1998, p. 116) notes that at times Islam has been viewed as a resistance ideology of the southward movement against the Christian overlords. The nobility and particularly those from Shoa were the primary beneficiaries of this expansion, while those from Tigray served as “junior partners” in the enterprise (Young, 2010, p. 192). The exclusion of Muslims from the political sphere, however, continued. As Abbas (2014, p. 190) argues, in the Ethiopian Christian empire, where national integration was synonymous with Amharization, those who refused to convert to Orthodox Christianity and learn Amharic were alienated, culturally marginalized, denied justice, and excluded from political power at all levels of the administrative hierarchy.

The 1931 constitution established equal rights and allowed Ethiopian Muslims to acquire land, hold official positions, and receive official recognition for Muslim festivals (Lapidus, 2002, p. 771). It is worthy of note that the constitution promulgated in 1931 gave nothing as an official religion of the state and established equal rights for any native of Ethiopia to obtain civil and military rank (Art. 19). Social prejudice, however, tended to make the position of Muslims under Ethiopian rule inferior to that of the Christians, for nationality and religion were inextricably bound together. Muslims, however, under the regime at the time, could acquire land in most parts; they held important positions in all regions where Islam was the predominant religion, and official recognition was given to the important Islamic festivals. Muslim delegates were included in the Ethiopian delegation to the peace conference of 1946 and took part in important state functions. While they developed commercial activities, Muslims’ exclusion from the public and the magisterial position was clear. Their opportunities to actively participate in the political life of the country were also by far less than those afforded their Christian counterparts. Their position was that of simple tolerance, but this improved greatly under Haile Selassie (Trimingham, 1952, p. 136).

In depicting the historical reactions of the Christian kingdom and Muslim sultanates, I underlined the fact that the conflictual accounts of the Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates were economic and political. I also showed that the weakening of the Christian kingdom provided opportunities to the Muslim sultanates to grow stronger and refuse to be tributary. The weakness of the Zagwe dynasty, for example, provided an opportunity to grow stronger and challenge the Christian kingdom. As the Solomonic kingdom strengthened, with the exception of a few decades, dominance remained in the hands of the Christian kingdom. In the creating of modern Ethiopia, Christianity was also used to forge unity, and the Muslim communities’ role in the political space dwindled. The first constitution and the revised constitution further precluded any possibility that a Muslim would become king.
3.10 Religion as Undesirable Historical Heritage

The 1974 revolution of Ethiopia officially divorced the long-held intimate relationship between the monarchs and the EOTC. The church lost much of its land as well as its political influence. The decree of equality of religions was the end of the supremacy of the church. Muslim holy days gained official status in addition to the Christian holidays. Muslims were also allowed to establish the EIASC on a de facto basis (Jon Abbink, 1998, p. 113; Dereje, 2013, p. 26; Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 7; Østebø, 2011, pp. 197-198). Part of the gain was reaped from the April 1974 demonstrations that marshaled around 100,000 Muslims in the streets of Addis Ababa. The public demonstration was the first of its kind and the largest in history, forwarding 13 demands of the Muslim communities. Besides the recognition of public holidays, the establishment of the EIASC and their recognition as Ethiopian Muslims instead of the former term “Muslims living in Ethiopia” were additional gains from the new regime (Østebø, 2011, p. 198).

The religious leaders were also very active in using the existing opportunities to develop cordiality with the new regime. Despite the fact that the EOTC enjoyed privileged status with Emperor Haile Selassie, His Holiness the Patriarch of the EOTC in a written message expressed his full support to the Provisional Military State of Ethiopia (PMG) and congratulated it for its accomplishments. Similarly, the Muslim communities in the capital also expressed their appreciation by sending a delegation to the Chairman of the Derg. The Imam of the Grand Mosque, speaking on behalf of Ethiopian Muslims, said that Ethiopian Muslims all over Ethiopia were delighted with peaceful change and that the Muslim communities fully supported the action taken by the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) and its objectives (Teferra, 2011, p. 131). To the dismay of both, however, the socialist state soon embarked on its anti-religious campaign, undermining the two religions.

The initial positive attitude the state had towards the Muslims and religion in general did not last long. As the state held dearly the Marxist-oriented ideology, it turned hostile to religion in general and both the Christian and Muslim faiths in particular. Religion was interpreted as a detrimental and undesirable historical heritage that was to be pushed out of the public sphere (Jon Abbink, 2007, p. 70; Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 7). With the exceptions of the first few years, the socialist military state that ousted the imperial regime exerted, if unsuccessfully, a concentrated effort to eliminate religion from Ethiopian life and culture. The goal was to privatize religious practices, and at times persecution was used as a means and public influence was wholly denied (Mohammed, 2012, p. 107).

The state also restricted both internal and external connections, which in turn limited networking opportunities. The implication for Muslims was the prohibition of mainly the importing of religious literature, limitation of pilgrimages to Mecca, and a prohibition on visits by foreign scholars (Østebø,
During this period, Islam in Ethiopia became further disconnected from its global faith partners. The Derg approach to the EOTC and religion was equally ill adapted to winning popular support. As a socialist state, it promoted atheism and attacked the church’s dogma, practices, and priests. It used mass associations to urge people to end baptisms, grieving ceremonies, fasting, and even attending church. Besides the indirect means, churches were destroyed, priests killed, and their wives raped (Young, 1998, p. 42).

In the 17 years (1974-1991) of the socialist regime, called the Derg, a vigorous attempt was made to corner religion into the private sphere, which of course was a failed project. The assertive secularism strategies implemented were short-lived. They did not bring a significant change in the people’s attitude towards religion. Religion indeed continued playing an important role in the expression of social identity (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 7). As Henze remarks (2001, p. 61), “In spite of Mengistu Haile Mariam’s efforts to discourage religious observance, the religious impulse remained very much alive in Ethiopia during the Derg period…”

Under the early phase of the Derg, the Muslim Oromo of Bale, organized under the Somali Abbo Liberation Front (SALF), engaged in an armed struggle against the state, which the political authorities viewed as religiously motivated. The connections to the Somalia state and the alleged support from the Islamic world caused the regime to apply rather strong measures to establish peace and order in the region (Østebø, 2012, pp. 182-183). Some Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Pakistan, Syria, and Iraq, were also supporting and abetting the Eritrean secession (M. Getachew, 2009, p. 52). The upsurge of Eritrean nationality in 1974 and the fact that the Eritrean liberation front at the time was a Muslim-dominated body might have added to the tension.

The religious reform of the military regime (the Derg), while it replaced the Christian monarchy, did not introduce radically different parameters to define Ethiopia’s national identity. As Dereje (2012, p. 1893) pointed out, the Ethiopian historiography developed in the imperial regimes remained without much adjustment. Inheriting from the imperial regimes, the nation continued to depict itself as a nation with an unbroken 3,000-year history. As a result, the Christian heroes continued to be magnified in the historical depiction, while the nation’s Islamic heritage was marginalized. Indeed, the military state abolished the privileged status of the EOTC. Successive measures taken against the church were the nationalization of all church property, elimination of state subventions, formal recognition of the equality of Islam, and allowing of the public celebration of its holidays. Part of the gains were attributed to the 1974 public protest, which was made by Muslims and Christians who had sympathy for their cause. Heavily focusing on the Amhara-Christian heritage, the espoused notion of nationality left little space for the country’s ethnic and religious diversity. It also contributed negatively to sustaining the inherent alienation of the Muslim population.
Practically, thus, the Derg’s members and cadres were of a Christian Orthodox origin, harboring inherent pejorative attitudes towards Muslims. As tensions arose in the Ogden area, the ancient perception of an external Islamic threat was combined with the revolutionary notion of global imperialism, where the Muslim population again was seen as a potential fifth column and a threat to national security and territorial sovereignty (Østebø, 2011, p. 200). After Ethiopia was invaded by the Somalis, as the Derg state allied with the Soviet state, there was a cultural reaction, in which an official Marxism-Leninism was overlaid on an old Orthodox Christian notion of the nation (Donham, 1999, p. 137). The Derg leaders were, however, astute enough to realize that religious traditions formed an important, even integral, facet of Ethiopian life and that it was somewhat counterproductive to attempt to crush religion completely. By the early 1980s, as problems with the revolution became apparent, the state courted the two most senior religious figures in the country, the Orthodox patriarch and the chief Muslim mullah of Addis Ababa, seating them both close to the Marxist rulers at important state events. After a few years of attempted secular nationalism, the Derg reconnected with the EOTC, which shared the state’s vision of the “Ethiopian nation,” and the EOTC became an important ally in an effort to stop the spread of Protestantism, which was defined as a foreign religion (Aalen, 2011, p. 31).

3.11 The Quest for Prester John

The first inspiring report of a powerful Christian priestly king, Prester John, reached medieval Europe in 1145. In the narratives that circulated, the priestly king was a pious one and capable of rescuing Christianity from the looming Islamic threat reigning far to the east, where the geography and inhabitants were unknown. The report came through Bishop Hugo of Jabala (Baldridge, 2012, p. 7). A letter professing to be from Prester John, seeking an alliance with European peers, was also received in 1165 by Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180) and widely circulated in the 12th century (Baldridge, 2012, p. 16; Salvadore, 2010, p. 143). The location of the king in the letter was described as “India.” The legend endured for 400 years, and after exhausting the possibilities of locating the king in Asia, the location was changed from Asia to Ethiopia (Baldridge, 2012, p. 16). Starting in the late 14th century, Europeans had come to imagine Ethiopia as one of the most alluring destinations in the Orient. In the process, the geographical and Messianic imagination of Europe and the Ethiopians’ appropriation played a decisive role.

Since the Middle Ages, the image of Prester John connoted “the archetype of the perfect Christian sovereign: His kingdom was rendered as the counterpoint to a Europe and the Middle East that had been ravaged by war and as the deus ex machina capable of resolving the perennial confrontation between the Christian West and the Muslim East” (Salvadore, 2010, p. 143). It is such an image that led the Italian and Portuguese courts to host Ethiopian pilgrims and diplomats as peers.
(Salvadore, 2010). The earlier locations that placed Prester John in the Far East started to fade away in the 13th century, relocating the imagination to Ethiopia. The shift was contributed to in part by the advent in Jerusalem of numerous Ethiopian Christian priests, monks, and other pilgrims.

Contact between Ethiopia and western Europe and especially Italy grew close in the late 14th and early 15th centuries (R. Pankhurst & Gérard, 1996, pp. 11-12). During these two centuries, Ethiopians successfully appropriated the myth of the devout Prester to their own land. The Catholic mission in Ethiopia shed new light by producing knowledge about the country. Consequently the new knowledge “effectively determined the death of Prester John in European imagination” (Salvadore, 2010, p. 162).

Despite the attraction of Prester John, the quest was initiated by Ethiopian rulers, who made the first initiatives for an alliance with the Latin West. In 1306, Emperor Wédémi Râcad sent a delegation to Europe in search of Christian allies to counter the militant Muslims who were harassing Christians in the neighboring areas of Nubian and Egypt. Later Ethiopian emperors continued to direct emissaries to Europe as the occasion warranted. In 1428, Emperor Yishak proposed an alliance between Ethiopia and the kingdom of Aragon, which was to be sealed by the double marriage of King Alfonso’s daughter to the emperor and of the king’s son to Yishak’s daughter. This proposal did not succeed.

The emperor’s successor, Emperor Zara Yaqob (1434-68), dispatched four Ethiopians in 1450 to Alfonso on a mission to hire European artisans. Two delegations of Ethiopian monks also attended the Christian meetings in Ferrara and Florence from 1437 to 1445 to forge a united Christian front. In the end, however, the Ethiopian church did not join the Christian coalition that briefly resulted from the council. Between 1481 and 1490, three more Ethiopian delegations were sent to Europe to discuss Christian unity. In 1420, Portuguese navigators identified the legendary Prester John with Ethiopia and the first priest entered Ethiopia in about 1494 but was prevented from returning home. In 1510, the Ethiopian regent, Empress Eleni, sent a personal message to the king of Portugal proposing an alliance between their two Christian countries to counter the Ottomans. In 1517, the Ethiopians successfully defeated the neighboring Muslim states of Adal and took possession of several Red Sea Ports (Northrup, 2003, pp. 17-18). The expulsion of the Jesuits in 1632 brought to an end Ethiopia’s connection with Europe. Until the beginning of the 19th century, there was little contact. This latter initiative also came from Europe. Crummy (1974, p. 434) characterizes the diplomatic relations of the 19th century as: “Beginning with blunt professions of friendship, they passed in the 1840s to more cunning, but still crude, attempts at flattery and the exploitation of Anglo-French rivalry…”
3.12 The Political Marginalization of Islam

This chapter attempted to highlight the historical relations of Ethiopian Islam and Ethiopian Muslims both in the monarchical and in the military socialist state. It also highlighted that the power relations between Ethiopian Muslims and Christian monarchical rulers was uneven. In the making of modern Ethiopia, the power asymmetry continued between adherents of Islam and Christianity. Among other things, their geographic location being at peripheries, their tendency to function as separate communities, and the long tradition of Christian control over Ethiopian Muslims contributed, both to their marginalization and to reduced opportunity to exercise political influence commensurate with their number. Asymmetry in power relations between Muslims and Christian rulers made Muslims into “others,” a secondary status in the citizenship of historic Ethiopia. The result was that, in the imperial regimes, they were never called Ethiopian Muslims but rather “Muslims living in Ethiopia,” a term that connotes foreignness. The implication of this was that only Orthodox Christians were fully Ethiopians. Consequently, Ethiopian Muslims experienced severe marginalization from national life by the political elites.

Dating back to the 16th century conflict with Ahmed binu Ibrahim, the political center of Ethiopia has always harbored a distinct fear of Islam and the devastating effects it might have for national sovereignty and unity.⁶ There was a perception of Islam as an external threat that potentially might align with the country’s own Muslim population. This fear was the main reason why the ruling elite marginalized the Muslim population, curbing their access to public spaces and hindering their access to political power. During the 19th century of modern colonialism, the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, and the Nile river basin became strategic areas and major colonial areas (Shabo & AiÔs-Moner, 2006, p. 190). Accordingly, Ethiopian states also effectively appropriated and accentuated the “Christian image” of the nation. As Ethiopia entered the 20th century, the superior position of Christianity and the inferior position of Islam were further institutionalized in the political culture of the country. Any attempt to overturn this balance produced quite a strong reaction from the Christians. Getachew (2009, p. 126) says that many Ethiopian leaders have a psyche and perception of Arab and hostile Muslim encirclement of Ethiopia.

The role Islam played in the modern Ethiopian state was indeed a modest one. Braukämper (2004, p. 3) notes that Ethiopian Muslims were hardly represented in the higher positions of the provincial administration or the central state in the imperial regime. Poluha (2004, p. 162) similarly observed that in the imperial regime assuming an administrative career, with few exceptions, required fluency in Amharic and adherence to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. In the imperial regimes, even in Islamic cities like Harar the state continued to favor Christians over Muslims in

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⁶Ahmed binu Ibrahim is locally known as Gragn, the left-handed. Among his defenders, however, he is Sahib al-Fath (the conqueror) and Imam Ahmad.
state jobs (Carmichael, 2004, p. 225). In fact, although the proportion according to religious criteria certainly changed under the military state and the present state, it has never reached the status of an approximate equilibrium commensurate with their number. As Shinn (2005, p. 97) remarks, the leadership continues to be largely Christian. Indeed historically there was a profound socio-political marginalization of Muslims that made them invisible within the Ethiopian polity, where they were regarded as second class citizens at best and “foreigners” at worst (Jon Abbink, 1998, p. 113; Dereje, 2012, p. 1893; Østebø, 2012, p. 189). The narrative of coexistence is also contested by Muslims, who maintain that the coexistence was made possible only by Christian dominance and the subsequent marginalization of Muslims (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 3).

As a result, before 1991 Ethiopia’s Muslims could be described as an invisible entity within the country, marginalized and secluded from the rest of the Ethiopian society (Jon Abbink, 1998, p. 113; Dereje, 2012, p. 1893; Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 5; Østebø, 2008, p. 416; 2013, pp. 7-8). This chapter has attempted to emphasize the fact that the political representation of Ethiopian Muslims under Ethiopian Christian rulers provided them at best a marginal role in the political life of the nation through public posts under a “Christian nation” banner. Such a depiction, however, is far from accurate. Ethiopia has always been a country of religious diversity, but its elites were Christians. Kaplan (2004, p. 376) aptly summarizes the implication of the Aksumite kingdom: “Whatever the initial motivations or consequences, events culminated in the Christianization of the kingdom as the new faith came to define the legitimacy of rulers and conditions for inclusion in the social elite.”
Chapter Four: Muslims Activists’ Memories and Their Use

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the overall objective is to examine collective memories that are advanced among the Muslim communities through the role of Muslim activists. To this end, I use as my point of departure the critiques of the activists regarding the available Ethiopian history. Looking into these critiques provides the schematic narrative templates through which evidence is selected from the complex historical repository and interpreted. The schematic narrative templates are helpful in two regards. The templates’ content indicates omission and commissions and also serves as narrative schemas for the construction of alternative narratives among Muslims.

The examination of the templates thus uncovers the underlying criteria, conscious or unconscious, used in the reconstruction of collective memories and the overall process of meaning making. The collective memories exhibit negotiation between various interest groups, primarily the state, the Ethiopianist scholars, the EOTC, and the Muslim activists. It could be fairly said that the respective objectives of these interest groups are different. The state looks into the past to legitimize that its rule is much better than the previous states and the alternatives espoused by the existing rival political parties. For Ethiopianist scholars, even if they do not always succeed in establishing that, the intent is to present an objective depiction of the past. The way EOTC adherents and institutions look into history is with a sense of pride. Ethiopian Muslim activists look into the past with a sense of marginalization and a concern about power asymmetry in contemporary Ethiopia.

In uncovering the overall critiques of the Muslim activists, I also compare and contrast the approaches of Muslim activists with Ethiopianist scholars in order to find out similarities and differences. I also look at the alternative narratives of activists in order to show the process of negotiation with the state and the Christians. In instances where the memory harbored by the Muslim activists is fiercely opposed by the Christian communities’ narrative, I also show their response. It should be noted that the official history of the nation, evident in the schools’ curriculum, has remained without much change. The debate is thus in popular level writings and the social media. As a result, to capture the voices of the Muslim activists, what I look into is mainly the popular historical writings, online Islamic radio networks, Islamic blogs, and social media.

In the following sections, I systematically present some major themes that determine the image of the past. In this regard, I limit my efforts to illustrative cases. The selected cases from Ethiopian history are those that cause debate among Christians and Muslims. The selection of conflictual accounts is partly because peaceful coexistence narratives are discounted among Muslim activists in relation to the political history of the nation and their implications for the Muslim community.

7 This chapter heavily draws on concepts and material from the fourth chapter of my previous work. See Tekalign (2016).
The first case is from the formative period of Islam. It is about King Najāshī, purportedly an Ethiopian king who not only received the companions of the prophet but also eventually converted to Islam. To the Muslims the king is a source of pride, while for the Christian community the conversion is an expression of a modern way of jihad. The second case relates to 16th century Ethiopia, where the glory days of Muslim sultanates were at their peak. In relation to it, I looked into Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, who defeated and subdued the Christian kingdom for one and a half decades. The Ethiopian Christian sources present him as an invader, while Islamic sources extol him as mujahidin, a Muslim conqueror that fought for the sake of Islam and Allah. From modern Ethiopia, the illustrative case is the last emperor, Haile Selassie, who is accused of pursuing a covert anti-Islamic policy that estranged the Muslim community from the national life. Among the Christian communities, however, he is extolled as a king that made concessions for the Muslim communities, like the translation of the Quran into Amharic and the establishment of Sharia as legally acceptable in court.

I also pondered about the utilities of the image of the past. The contests in the construction of the past are not inconsequential. In the retelling and reconstruction of the past lies also the concern of the present. In a way, the portrayals of the past display the imprint of the present. The images of the past are designed to invoke sympathy from the non-Muslim community and a vitalizing energy for achieving cultural equity with their Christian neighbors. I also note that the way in which the two inextricably intertwined objectives are framed made the claims of Muslim activists contestable.

In order to identify the portrayals of the past and their uses, the objects of research are Ethiopian Muslim activists’ voices. The role of the activists, as any other agents of signification, is clearly to invent, articulate, and disseminate ideas that resonate with the community they represent. The narratives of the Muslim activists are understood as attempts to diagnose the prevailing perceived anomaly, hold accountable the perceived agents that caused the condition, and provide a roadmap to remedy the problem. I also look into the potential implications of the overall criticisms, the images of the past, the major themes and the underlying goals.

4.2 A Biased Historical Account: The Narrative of Religious Marginalization

Many scholars recognize that Ethiopian Islam did not yet receive a fair share in Ethiopian studies given its long national heritage. The overall assessment of the scholars has been in comparison to both Ethiopian Judaism and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, and the available scholarly corpus poorly reflects in terms of volume (Crummey, 1990, p. 118; Insoll, 2003, p. 39). Besides the dearth, the available works are also not without criticism (A. Hussien, 1994, p. 777).

In the broader sense, the critical stances of Muslim activists in the discourse of Ethiopian history are not outliers. The activists’ critiques, even if they arguably fit within the broader boundaries of
scholarly exchanges, have unique salient features that are worth highlighting. Unlike in a scholarly reconstruction, even if one could debate whether that is a feasible project or not, the motivations of the activists are not based on detached objectivity. The historical narratives are told in the first person plural, as “our history.” Behind the narratives of activists lies a desire not only to unlock the past shrouded in mysteries but also to address the concerns of the present.

In the Bilal online Islamic show, Ahmedin explains his motivation for writing a popular level history book. His book ከኢትዬጲያውያን በ6፣15 እና 17ዎ0 ከภาวะ ከንስሊሮች ያገኙ ያስረር ያር ከፋ ከ615-1700 (Ethiopian Muslims from 615-1700: A history of domination and resistance, part I) was well received. The impact of the book also increased after various online Islamic radio outlets narrated it from cover to cover. The appearance of the author as a frequent guest to expound on historical issues in relation to Ethiopian Muslims on Ethiopian online Islamic radio and television stations increased the circulation of his ideas. The book also served as an inexhaustible “store” as both a source material and inspiration for the production of various documentaries and social media discussions.

The narrative of Ahmedin goes against the widely held notion of a cordial relationship between Ethiopian Muslims and Christians that the state, the EOTC, and Ethiopianist scholars propagate. Christians, the state, and Ethiopianist scholars tend to paint the historic Christian and Muslim relationship as one of toleration and peaceful coexistence. The conflictual accounts are usually treated as a few episodic instances that disturbed the balance. The cordial characterization of course does not deny the power asymmetry between the Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates. The underlying motives of these conflictual episodic historical instances are also understood as political and economic in nature rather than religious.

The title of Ahmedin’s book not only runs against the popular perception of Ethiopian history but also is also provocative for Ethiopian Christians. Increasingly, provocative titles have become the defining features of popular literature that addresses Christian-Muslim relations. To Ahmedin, however, the theme of domination and resistance captures the essence of Ethiopian Muslims’ history. To him, the title is simply factually accurate and the characterization is historic. Ahmedin’s comment about Ethiopian historical works is, “… when I understand the way and the process our history is written there are non-factual elements and partiality” (BS, 2011). His assessment of Ethiopian history is not unique among Muslim activists. In Radio Najāshī’s ከአንድ ከተጋዳቸው ያስረር ከፋ (Untold Ethiopian Histories) weekly program, the producer states, “…on the front line of Ethiopian nations the ones whose histories are suppressed are Muslims” (Muhaba, 2015). Ethiopian Muslim activists, in line with the critique of the Ethiopianist scholars and the state, also observe the writing of Ethiopian history as an ideological project.

The overall endeavor of the activists is not only to revise history but also to become active in creating and popularizing an alternate version as a route to empowerment and political participation
of the Muslim communities in Ethiopia. The marginalization narrative of Ethiopian Muslim activists in relation to the mainstream historical discourse falls within the historical discourse about Ethiopian history that Ethiopian history has been “an ideological project” (Toggia, 2008). In the following section, I set forth the narrative logic of the marginalization narrative espoused among Muslim activists.

4.3 The Narrative Logic of the Marginalization Narrative

For Ethiopian Muslim activists, the predicaments of the available political history connote three distinct but inextricably intertwined elements, namely the identity of the historians, their perspectives, and the sources. The problem with the official history, for the activists, is that the scholars have been primarily Christian (4.3.1), their perspectives are also a Christian perspective (4.3.2), and the sources relied upon are also similarly Christian (4.3.3). I will briefly discuss each of them.

4.3.1 Monopolization by non-Muslim historians

In their effort to discredit the mainstream history, activists point out that the majority of Ethiopian history scholars are Christians. The Muslim activists ask “whose history, benefiting whom, and on which records?” It is due to the Christian background of the historians that the overall emphasis of Ethiopian history has been on northern Christian Ethiopia and about Christianity (BS, 2011). In this line of reasoning, the dearth of works on Ethiopian Islam is partly because there were not many Ethiopian Muslim scholars. Ethiopianist scholars, both foreign and local, also recognize the dearth, but they attribute it to the predominance of the Semitist centrist paradigm that guided most of the pre-1991 historical inquiries, which led the historical corpus to be mainly about the northern Christian kingdom and its subjects (A. Hussien, 1994, p. 777; Teshale, 1995, p. xiii).

The activists also argue that the already available history is devoid of the Ethiopian Muslims’ perspectives. Hisaq Eshetu expressed the overall frame under which Muslim activists interpret history very well. His remark about the nature of Ethiopian Muslims’ historical representation was, “Concerning the Ethiopian history I have our own perspective. From our perspective, our history is intentionally overlooked, demonized, and belittled. Islamic sultanates and their contributions to civilization were not valued and more so in the previous states” (S. Solomon, 2012). The state also recognizes that the assimilation strategy of the previous states’ politics, which espoused the Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity, excluded the perspective of other religions and ethnicities. To the state, however, the case of Islam is no different from other ethnicities’ historical marginalization. As a way forward, the state insists on rectifying the ethnic marginalization and maintaining the
secular order. The state looks suspiciously at any kinds of mobilizations, other than those that it perceives as purely spiritual and subsumes under its ethno-linguistic political program.

From a scholarly perspective, the marginalization narrative might be remotely connected to the critiques that Muslims’ everyday life, beliefs, histories, social roles, and culture were largely ignored in earlier studies (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 2). In the opinion of Ethiopian Muslim activists, however, the failure is much deeper. It is not only that Muslims are not studied in their historical context. It is also about the fact that Muslims are generally ignored except for their conflictual episodes with the Christian kingdom, as the mainstream historical works tend to depict it. For the activists, the historical marginalization is an intentional religious marginalization. It is about ignoring Ethiopian Muslims’ perspectives that cherish their cultural heritage, contribution to civilization, and literature since they are Islamic.

### 4.3.2 The dominance of the Christian perspective

In the opinion of the activists, the available history of Ethiopia is the perspective of the Christians. At the core of the critique, there is a post-modern approach to history, the possibility of constructing multiple meanings for history in equally valid but also at times contradictory ways. Such an approach is necessary for the Muslim activists because the assumption they begin with is that the religious traditions espoused in the Quran and Hadith are authoritative and reliable. Following a fundamentalist approach to religious texts, the assumption is that whatever the texts speak, be it a scientific question or historical, is the ultimate truth. The post-modern approach of perspectivism thus frees them from the arduous task of critically engaging the religious traditions as historical sources.

The logic seems to follow the postmodern conception of explanation and understanding in terms of relativism and perspectivism. With their criticism, the activists discount the objectivists’ stance that dominated the majority of Ethiopian historical works. Such an approach towards Ethiopian history is not, of course, unique. Messay (2006, pp. 815-832) in a similar tone advocates the conception of history from the viewpoint of the people themselves so that positive views about Ethiopian history and culture could develop. Unlike the Muslim activists, however, Messay also realizes that such methods largely draw from post-modernism, which releases a historical approach from certain acceptable norms.

The post-modern approach could be welcomed since it exposes the pure objectivity assumption of mainstream history as an attainable goal. It also recognizes that values are inherent to the enterprise of historical reconstruction. If the method is pressed hard, it entails a possible danger. The radical post-modernist approach to history yields the image of the past as molded by and subservient to the needs of the present. Sometimes these criticisms are stretched further and preclude
conversations among different perspectives. The result thus becomes the exclusion of the other. As each community becomes the ultimate authority of its own history, the knowledge production process is mainly to be construed as an inward enterprise and criticisms from outside are largely to be ignored as the perspectives of the others. It should be noted that narratives loaded with one’s perspective and devoid of “the other’s” perspective rarely advance meaningful dialogue and understanding in religiously diverse societies.

4.3.3 The dominance of Christian historical sources

Muslim activists’ criticism of the shortcomings of the available history also derives from the fact that Ethiopian historical works relied heavily on Christian chroniclers for historical constructions. The activists also recognize that the mainstream historical accounts considered Arabic sources and European travelers’ accounts (BS, 2011). In the activists’ view, given that Ethiopian history relies heavily on Christian sources, the image produced is that of the Christians. The criticism is that not only was the historical project incomplete but it was also in some way biased against Muslims. In the narration of the Ahmed Gragn documentary, for example, the narrator remarks, “Our Ethiopian history has been written by the clerics of the church and to serve the church” (IAP, 2015). The implication is that there is a great deal that requires revision and much more has to be written from the perspectives of Ethiopian Muslims (Muhammed, 2014).

The implication of this critique seems to be the need for inclusiveness in historical projects. Partly, the call is exactly that, but the actual reconstructions are far from that. The practices that dominate the new reconstruction among the activists have been to discredit the Ethiopian sources as unreliable and to embrace Arabic sources without critical engagement. For the sake of fairness, however, the reconstructed histories should also accept the possibility that Arabic sources are no less ideologically motivated than the Ethiopian Christian sources. In fact, in historical inquiries, every source exhibits some sort of disposition and ideological attachment. The role of an astute historian is thus to examine critically the evidence. Among the Muslim activists, detail and precision are confused with facts. Such an approach to memory is not unique. There is a widespread perception that detailed recollections are less likely to be false and thus likely are accurate. As Reisberg remarks, as events are reported and re-reported, details tend be added, and with a bit of time false reports could become elaborated at greater length (Reisberg, 2014, p. 80).

In this line, Insoll did research about Arabic sources used in the reconstruction of African history in the medieval period. More specifically, he covered the period from about 800-1450. His examination, among others, made clear that despite the detailed and precise nature of Arabic sources’ descriptions, the sources have to be used carefully. He remarked, “…these men were all Muslims, often very devout Muslims, whose lives and way of thinking were structured by Islam. Their
writings represent Islamic ideology” (Insoll, 2004, p. 165). It seems that the filtering criteria of activists in selecting sources is basically based on whether the sources speak of issues on which Ethiopian and other sources are silent or the Arabic sources affirm Islamic tradition. This is very evident in the way the Arabic sources are extolled over Ethiopian sources as the most reliable sources. The implication is that source selection is highly biased to the extent to which the sources justify the project at hand.

One should note that the lament towards the marginalization of Ethiopian history is extended into the present and is part of the political narrative. It is repeatedly underscored that behind the understatement of Ethiopian Muslims’ history lies a nation that is unjust and a system that fails to treat equally all religious groups, and particularly the Muslim population is the victim. The activists anonymously note that there are various qualitatively positive treatments in the contemporary Ethiopian state. They also emphasize that no redressing effort has been made so far towards the recognition of this history. To them, however, what has been done so far is not enough. There must be some practical measures taken. A real recognition is envisioned in practical terms. They say that the improvement would be evident if public utilities were named after prominent Islamic personalities, for instance. In the absence of public recognition in terms of naming public utilities and streets, the role of Muslims and their exemplariness remained unattended. Inherent to the discourse of overlooked Muslim personalities is the sentiment that they are left out because they were Muslims.

As Ethiopian Muslim activists note, there are not any public utilities in Ethiopia named after great personalities of the Islamic traditions. The same is also true of religious figures from Christian traditions. The memorial statue erected near St. George’s Cathedral in Addis Ababa is not a representation of a martyr. He is someone who was executed by Italian occupiers since he publicly condemned colonialism, invasion, and massacre, and who happened to be an EOTC bishop. Thus, failure to include Islamic religious personalities has nothing to do with the religious background. Public utilities and street names are usually designated in the names of individuals in relation to historical incidents and mostly related to their role in military involvement. The position of the Ethiopian Muslim communities in the political system, however, was that at a minimum the criteria did not do much justice to the inclusion of prominent Islamic personalities. The contemporary state, espousing secularism, avoids religious-related criteria for public utilities. If the historic Muslim personalities fall under the ethno-linguistic programs of the state, however, it does not oppose the promotion of them. A good example is that the Harari regional state produced the history of Ahmed Gragn, the translation of Futuh Al-Habasha, in a positive light, presenting him not as an invading foreigner but rather as a hero with a vision for state building.
The claim that there are not any Muslim personalities, after whom public utilities are named, is clearly inaccurate. The characterization is a display of availability heuristic bias. There are clearly, even if very few, names of public utilities and streets designated after Muslim personalities. One of the streets of Addis Ababa is called Sheik Hojele Street, after a ruler that governed the Benshangul Gumz people group. As one could note, the name of this street not only bears a Muslim name but also a religious title. From the time of the imperial Haile Selassie, there is a primary school named after Dejazmach Omar Samatar, an Ethiopian Muslim Somali who fought against Italian aggression. There is also a section of the largest open market in Addis Ababa popularly referred to after a Muslim member of the imperial Parliament, Fit‘awrari Amede Lema. These are just a few examples.

Contemporary research about Ethiopian Islam recognizes that the role of Ethiopian Muslims in the modern Ethiopian state lagged behind the ideal. There was indeed profound socio-political marginalization of Muslims. Muslims were not that visible in the Ethiopian polity (Jon Abbink, 1998, p. 113; Dereje, 2012, p. 1893; Østebø, 2012, p. 189). Clearly, there was power asymmetry between Ethiopian Muslims and the Christian polity.

Braukämper (2004, p. 3) perceptively notes that in the imperial regimes Ethiopian Muslims were barely represented in either the provincial administration or the central government. The difference with the Muslim activists, however, lies in the cause to which such a dearth is attributed. Some observers note that underrepresentation and limited opportunities for career advancement in the imperial regime are partly products of an assimilative centralization effort that generally required fluency in Amharic and adherence to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity (Markakis, 1987, p. 274). It could be fairly argued that in the imperial regimes even in Islamic cities like Harar, the state continued to favor Christians over Muslims in government jobs even before the Italian occupation (Carmichael, 2004, p. 225). Putting in context the issue of Harar also helps to clarify this anomaly. The Harari people showed allegiance to Lij Iyyåsu, the heir of Menelik II, rather than to Haile Selassie, who later replaced him.

The inclusion of very few Muslim personalities in the administration of Haile Selassie’s government is, however, against a thesis that the imperial government is against each and every thing related to Islam and Muslims. During the reign of Haile Selassie, there was clear evidence that defied such generalizations. Dejazmach Omar Samatar, an Ethiopian Somali, who fought against Italian aggression, earned a military rank. Ali Mirah, the sultan of Afar, also earned the honorable title of Bitwoded from Haile Selassie. The literal translation of the nobility title Bitwoded is “beloved.” According to Marcus, it is equivalent to earl (Marcus, 1994, p. 230). A review of Fit‘awrari Ahmede,

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8 Fit‘awrari and Grazmach are military titles. The literal meaning is “Leader of the vanguard” and “commander of the right wing,” respectively. According to Marcus, Fit‘awrari is equivalent to viscount while Grazmach is equivalent to baron (Marcus, 1994, p. 231).
a former Muslim member of the Parliament’s biography, stated that there were 35 Muslim members of Parliament out of 210 in 1959 (Birhanu, 2011).

The overall approach to Ethiopian history among Muslim activists should not stop looking at the above major criticism in order to evaluate its impact for an interreligious dialogue. Despite the underrepresentation of Ethiopian Muslims in history, concerns of historical representation are at times presented in a very hostile and polemic manner. The polemic nature of such an argument is further evident in the way some Christian traditions are presented. The Radio Najāshī program criticized the traditions of the Ethiopian Eunuch and Saba as fictional accounts that, due to undue emphasis stemming from the privileged position of Christianity, led to the publication of many books. The program alleges that, sadly, the true histories of the Muslim community remain unnoticed. Such a statement was made in a program where Malik ‘Ambar, a Muslim general in India of Ethiopian descent, was discussed (Muhaba, 2015).

Some Christians respond negatively to such narratives, framing the revisionist attempt as a modern tool of jihad. As an example, an apologist blog states (Answeringethiomuslims, 2015):

Now, those anti-Ethiopian Muslims from abroad and Ethiopia are trying to revise history. Through it, they are also endeavoring to catalyze jihad. This is expressed in two ways. The first one is an attempt to resurrect the ancient fable of Arabs of “Al- Najāshī,” while the second one is to praise jihadists like Ahmed Gragn that invaded and attacked Ethiopians (My own translation from original Amharic).

4.4 Counter Narratives and Polemics

In order to flesh out the above abstract criticism of Ethiopian Muslim activists, it is important to look into some of the actual critiques advanced against the available historical works. It suffices to give two examples for illustrative purposes. If not all, there are some historical works, but mainly a popular perception, that the rise of Islam contributed directly to the decline and the fall of the Aksumite kingdom. Muslim activists present such a perception as a baseless fabrication and fictional account. Their argument is that the decline of Aksum’s civilization is the result of the expansion of the Beja tribes to their south in the seventh and eighth centuries and the rebellion of Youdit Gudit in the 10th century. Indeed mainstream scholarship takes the two incidents seriously as detrimental, final blows against the already weakening Aksumite Christian kingdom (Muhammed, 2014).

What is ignored or discounted in the narratives of Muslim activists is that the expansion of the Arab Muslims in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt also had two significant consequences for the Aksumite Christian kingdom. Clearly, with Islamic expansion the Red Sea coast from which the Aksumite kingdom used to amass much revenue was lost and Ethiopia was cut off from the rest of the world
Consequently, to compensate for the loss of the revenue, the kingdom was forced to move further south.

Historically speaking, the expansion of the Beja during the late seventh and eight centuries was in response to the expansionist pressure exerted by Muslim Arabs from Egypt. Consequently, the expansion of the Beja towards the south in large numbers forced the Aksumite kingdom to lose most of the territory that had been under Aksumite control in the north (Levine, 2000, pp. 70-71; Tekletsadek, 1990b, pp. 563-564). Some activists also argue that the occupation of Dahlak Island was the Arabs’ response to the Ethiopian attack on Jeddah. In fact, not only were the actions of the Arabs defended, but also the occupation of the Dahlak seems to be have been received as a blessing in disguise, since the island became a point of departure for Islam’s expansion in East Africa. Such a celebration is not usually welcomed in Ethiopia, where primary allegiance must be to the nation. As a second illustration, we can see how the Solomonic dynasty is portrayed among Muslim activists. For many Christians, the revival of the Solomonic dynasty was the beginning of the glory days and marked a tense relationship with the neighboring Muslim sultanates of Ethiopia. Ethiopian Muslims, however, tend to construe the period as an intentional attack against Muslims and Islam.

The implication of the above criticism is not a trivial matter. It clearly indicates that the counternarratives of the available history, presumably the perspectives of Muslims, are also equally problematic to the Christians. The underlying philosophical orientation of scholarly works seems to be highly guided by the basic tenets of post-modernity. If radical post-modernity is pursued, then the possibility for dialogue will be endangered, since the two communities hold differing kinds of opinions about the past and still should relate. This is even more evident if one looks at the sources with which the alternate historical narratives are constructed. Unlike the criticized Ethiopianist scholars, who attempted to engage critically with all the sources, the counternarratives ignored some of the local sources and uncritically relied on and embraced foreign Arab sources. Again, such an approach does not bring into reality the presumed inclusion. The new inclusion is sure to be a new exclusion that perpetuates the cycles it attempted to resolve.

The specific narratives relating to the fall of the Aksumite kingdom and the implications of its revival are also too simplistic, failing to capture the nuanced version of the reality. First, the new perspectives fail to capture the political and economic side of the events. Second, some of the depictions are not historically accurate. In the scholarly argument of the fall of the Aksumite kingdom, the dominant position is that the role of the Arabs did not have a direct impact but had indirect consequences. The pressuring of the Beja tribes without a doubt created pressure on the Aksumite kingdom and also the loss of revenue and of contacts with the outside world.

The depictions of the Arabs’ invasions as merely retaliatory actions also defy historical facts. After all, the devastating retaliation of the Muslims’ Umayyad army that led to the destruction of
Adulis and the occupation of Dahlak Island came far before the 702 invasion of the Aksumite army, and it was a competition between two ports. The Ethiopian fleet attacked the Arabian Port Shu'ayba during Muhammad’s life (Cerulli, 1998, p. 577). For example, the Arabs attacked and attempted to destroy the port of Adulis in 640 AD. Similarly, in 702 the Aksumite army invaded Jeddah and caused heavy damage (A. G. Solomon & Wudu, 2014, p. 8).

4.5 The Goal of the Marginalization Narrative: Provoking Sympathy

As I stated in the introduction, I mainly reviewed available secondary sources to identify the portrayal of the past. The sources consulted were popular level historical works, blogs run by Ethiopian Muslims, Islamic magazines and newspapers, online radio networks, social medias and Islamic reviews, letters submitted to government officials, and requests by delegations of the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora. Inherent to all is the issue of the historic marginalization of Islam and Muslims that requires redressing. The overall approach of Muslim activists’ to the past is that Ethiopian history exhibited a great deal of suppression and marginalization. In this line of reasoning, Ahmedin notes (2010, p. 17):

_The emperors took openly and in disguise various measures to weaken Muslims. Probably, with the exception of Fasilides of Gonder, all emperors did the same. Despite some remnants of the past relentless effort to convince us that the imperial regimes were nationally benevolent and heroic figures, we should not refrain from talking and writing about the anguish and adversity, they caused in all the opportunities that we get. Because receiving them as heroes is to participate against the mockery of the oppressed, to pleasure with the scar left and not to close the possibility of similar future actions, and to risk the lasting spirit of forgiveness and democracy_ (My own translation from original Amharic).

Ahmedin is not alone in his assessment. Many Ethiopian Muslim activists follow his narrative frameworks. Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora delegates have also shown similar assessments of the past. In a document submitted to the late prime minister of Ethiopia in the Ethiopian millennium, they stated (EMDAC, 2007, p. 2):

_What has been realized, at the end of Aksumite kingdom reign, was neither maintained nor improved. The predecessors of the Aksumite kingdom, especially the actions of the Solomonic dynasty (1260-1966), were contrary to the Aksumite kingdom. The military struggles of the middle age, from the seventh to 13th centuries, against Islamic systems and sultanates were a_
coup d’état against our honored history. Islam was framed as an enemy. Muslims were viewed as foreigners (My own translation from original Amharic).

Another activist writes in a Muslim blog a similar concern (Muhammed, 2014):

It is known that in the seventh century our country Ethiopia, after Mecca, was a nation that received Muslims. However, from that age itself Islam has been considered as foreign and a source of threat. From its beginning, its fate was to be looked at as foreign political phenomenon and a survival threat. This blind outlook denies the contribution of Islam to the overall development of Ethiopian culture, Muslims’ economic significance, the positive role for Islam for the expansion and development of literature, and in general its contribution to the multinationalism of Ethiopian people (My own translation from original Amharic).

The above three quotations are samples that indicate the dominant outlook of Muslim activists towards Ethiopian history. In the opinion of the activists, the Christian monarchs pursued anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim policy. The terminologies used also imply that the overall affair was that of a trauma whose effect continues to be felt. It also has a sense of lament. It views the fall of Islamic sultanates with regret and considers their destruction as coups d’état against an honored history of Ethiopian Islam and Muslims. As one could observe from the above quotations, there is a broader level of consensus with differences in detail – what Wertsch calls a “schematic narrative template,” a general pattern that allows variation in details but reflects a single general story line (Wertsch, 2008, pp. 122-123).

For some, the injustice and inequality began right from the very beginning. Such characterization alludes to the records of Islamic tradition that presents the Christian clerics and the people rising against the king upon conversion. Others emphasize the so-called reinstitution of the Solomonic kingdom as symbol of religious injustice and inequality. The above narration clearly ignores periods of peaceful existence and the episodic characteristics of much of the conflicts. What is also missing from the pictures is the economic motive behind the struggle of the two kingdoms. The narrative also sets aside the assault made against the Christian kingdom and the havoc it caused. The critique seems to fall into the same trap they seek to correct, a balanced perspective on the matter.

Central to the historical discourse also lies the issue of citizenship. In the opinion of the activists, the contribution of Ethiopian Muslims in terms of literature, civilization, economic significance, and culture was not given due emphasis. All their contributions were rather ignored. More than that, the way Islam and Muslims are framed was also that of enemies of Ethiopia. The
exclusion of other religious identities from Ethiopian nationhood defining is not unique to Muslim activists. Messay (2008, p. 126) also remarks, “… for centuries the Ethiopian Orthodox Church defined the Ethiopian identity. ... The Ethiopian identity was inseparably blended with Orthodox Christianity.” Trimingham (1952, p. 22) also argues, “Christianity is the bulwark of Ethiopian nationality.” Attempts of integrations, using the Amhara language (Amharic) and religion (Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Christianity) as symbols of national identity were part of the sentiment (Beken, 2012, p. 21). As Donham (1999, p. 143) notes, as a result of the appropriation of Orthodox Christian culture, an Ethiopian converting to another religion was tantamount to rejecting Ethiopian nationality. The conception of a convert is thus that of becoming a foreigner. The Ethiopian identity created through a Christian image, however, was exclusionary. It set aside other religious identities from the national life.

Ahmedin not only championed the dissemination of the view that Ethiopian Muslims’ political history is that of marginalization and suppression; he also outlined the reasons why others should follow his footsteps. To him, such an approach is necessary to combat the pressure that everyone should accept the monarchs as historical heroes. In his opinion, the possibility of abating similar future injustice also hinges on correctly remembering the injustices. To him, a lasting spirit of forgiveness and democracy also thrive when one accepts the realities of the past.

Notwithstanding his concern and critique of idealizing the monarchs as angelic figures devoid of any historical injustice, the approach of Ahmedin is no less than demonization. Ignoring the power consolidation motives and inventing religious motivation at the center of the injustice fails the referential validity of Ethiopia’s past. It is one thing to perceive the past and another to present a fact; the two seem to be conflated quite frequently among Muslim activists. What should be avoided is a simplistic either/or narrative. There should be some level of openness to accepting the nuanced reality. Indeed, those historical injustices should not be buried as if they did not happen; but to bring them into discussion at every opportunity, however, helps no one. Learning from the past requires remembering and effectively appropriating principles not to repeat the past mistakes. Similarly, true forgiveness requires honest recognition of the past mistakes and a decision not to repeat them in the future. The sense of attachment with the past, as if the present Muslim communities bore directly all those pains and infliction from the past, is likely also to nurture a mentality that the presumed progeny of the oppressors are also equally guilty. This does not help anyone.

The criticism of Ethiopian monarchs becomes more specific with the modern period, especially that of Haile Selassie. The negative sentiment towards Haile Selassie among others seems to hinge on four interrelated activities of the king. First, the rise of Haile Selassie to power hinged on, among other factors, the rumor that Lij Iyyäsu had converted to Islam. Clearly, then, he in a way symbolizes a monarchical structure which did not provide any room for Muslims to participate in the Ethiopian
polity. Second, Haile Selassie dismantled the resistance in Harar; the organization of the opposition was clearly Islamic. His action against the rebels, thus, can be easily conflated with action against Islam and Muslims. Thirdly, the revised constitutions of Ethiopia further institutionalized the myths of the Solomonic dynasty and robbed any possibility for Muslims to participate in the highest level of political participation. Notwithstanding the privileged position of the church and the benefits it entitles, the declaration was a political project that effectively controlled the church. Fourthly, and probably stronger than the other reasons, is that there are elderly people who have experienced first-hand injustice and inequality due to their religious allegiances. This is very evident because almost all the documentaries prepared, either by Muslim activists or by the state, display elderly people who narrate first-hand their own experience. In fact, no one should deny the experiences of these testimonies. These are not, however, the only biographical accounts available from the Muslim community. There are voices that present more nuanced views that are ignored in the collective memory reconstruction.

In the following paragraphs, I look at a few of the emerging themes of “modern oppression” by Haile Selassie. The Al-Ahbash Islamic Club prepared a documentary in cooperation with the EIASC titled *Islam and Ethiopia*. The objective of the documentary is to depict the historic relationship of Islam and Ethiopia. In it the narrator remarks about the Haile Selassie government (AAIC & EIASC, 2010):

*In Haile Selassie’s government, individuals were intentionally prohibited from taking any part in the growing modern world only because they were Muslim. In the modern world, by pursuing a policy that curtails Muslims from the opportunities that benefit themselves and the country, Muslims were forced to remain in poverty and ignorance. The rights he withheld from the Muslim community are many. Just to state as examples: 1) He prohibited Muslims from the opportunity of education and also withheld the right to have a passport so that they cannot even learn abroad, 2) He made it impossible for Muslims to be recruited in the army, and 3) He pursued intentionally a policy not that ends but that perpetuates banditry and conflict in regions dominated by Muslims* (My own translation from original Amharic).

The activists also charge that the imperial government systematically avoided the employment of Muslims in nationally significant public offices related to defense, policing, and security. Mainstream scholarship has also captured this very reality. What has been missing from Ethiopian Muslim activism, however, is the overall context that elicited such injustice. It was not because the people were only Muslims. It also had much to do with politics. Part of the exclusion from state organizations was “intent on countering any ‘Islamic’ opposition that might generate negative
publicity for Ethiopia in the Middle Eastern and Western presses” (Carmichael, 2004, p. 227). The state constrained the participation of Muslims in politics and closed off the possibility of a Muslim king in Ethiopia. This is because the legitimacy of the state heavily relied upon a political theology that derives its lineage from King Solomon.

The state also controlled the movement of the Muslim community through declining to provide passports. It treated them as foreigners rather than Ethiopians. Notwithstanding the unfairness of the state’s approach, the measure’s motive was primarily political. At that time there was a massive propaganda campaign by Egypt’s Radio Cairo that defined the primary alliance of Ethiopian Muslims in religious terms. Egypt also supported the secessionist liberation movements in Ethiopia (M. Getachew, 2009, p. 46). The tale also ignores that fact that there were organized movements among Ethiopian Muslims in Eritrea and Somalia (Wudu, 2012, pp. 146-147). The narrative also fails to capture the fact that many Harari supported Lij Iyyâsu, which led to their imprisonment and murder (Carmichael, 2004, p. 224). Given these pictures, attributing the overall actions of the state only to religious motives does not do justice to the historic representation. Another activist in a similar line comments (Dimitsachin-Yisema, 2014):

*In the reign of King Haile Selassie, there was a gleam of light towards modern education. The participation of the Muslim community in modern education, however, forced them to learn about religious beliefs they do not hold. If one reached a higher education level, he should change his religion. Otherwise, it was impossible to join a higher institution having Islam as one’s religion and with an Islamic name. A handful of individuals hiding their religious identity and changing their names had a higher education opportunity (My own translation from original Amharic).*

To what extent does the above claim represent the reality of Ethiopian Muslims? A proper evaluation of the dissent regarding modern education requires answering two interrelated but logically distinct deductions. First, the lament of the Muslim activists relates to the curricula of the newly instituted state schools. Even if it is not openly expressed as being Christian, the objection refers to Christian-related curriculum that is provided as a moral course. The school employs Christians to teach the moral course, which of course is religion in disguise (Markakis, 2011, pp. 12-13).

The second proposition relates to the fact that it is impossible to enroll in higher education unless the person puts aside his Islamic identity. Putting aside Islamic identity is interpreted in the light of inability to hold an Islamic name and of refraining to express outward signs of religious expressions without revoking the right to learn in higher institutions. This cannot be true. According
to the statistical data compiled by the Department of Sociology of the then Haile Selassie I University, Muslims made up just 5.2% of students. There were not only students with Muslim names but also scholarships were provided to them, one of which was the offer of scholarships to Harari boys at Täfäri Mekonen School in Addis Ababa (Carmichael, 2004, p. 228).

Also in Haile Selassie's regime, Harari were accepted in the Ethiopian military and a few eventually attained high rank (Carmichael, 2004). Ahmedin wrote an article in a popular level magazine in which he extensively discussed how Haile Selassie denied opportunities for learning to the Muslim community (Ahmedin, 2011a). The details of his contentions are many, but just for the framing let us look into one of his complaints, that the first education minister was the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. What the presentation fails to capture, however, is the underlying reasons. In the first modern state-supported school, the teachers were recruited from Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon (Gizaw, 2009, p. 21). The relationship with Egypt was always through an Egyptian abunä, and thus his appointment as Minister of Education is not an anomaly. The other reason is that the clergy, who used to provide traditional education, were against the move of establishing modern education. Dismantling that opposition naturally required religious personnel who would support the idea, and the abunä was the right candidate for the job.

The Ethiopian Muslim population census is a very contentious area for Muslim activists. To them, the nation always underestimated its Muslim population to create an image that Ethiopia is a Christian island (EMDAC, 2007, pp. 13-14). Part of the reason is that there was not a very reliable census conducted in the nation. Thus, the sources at their disposal were foreign estimates that were projected. The sources varied in the percentage of representation, and the low end usually has been a third of the population while the upper end at times stretched into three-fourths of the total population. The nation in fact did a national census in 1984 that counted Ethiopian Muslims at 33%, and that percentage has remained intact since then. The 1994 and 2007 election results pushed the percentage to nearly 34%.

Ethiopian Muslim activists are of the opinion that the present census result underestimates the proportion of Ethiopian Muslims. The lowest bar the activists seem ready to accept is about 45% (EMDAC, 2007, p. 13). Behind the contentions of land lies the presentation of the nation primarily as a Christian nation. The perception is that statistics do not lie, and finally the discourse of Ethiopia as a Christian nation will end if the percentage indicates their outnumbering. Besides the presentation, there is also an ambition that Ethiopia should strengthen its ties to the Arab world. In fact, the 2007 Muslim Diaspora request included a call for Ethiopia to join the Arab League. Partly also the debate about proportion relates to the issue of representation. A higher number of Muslims could always be used as an indication that Muslims’ representation in national life still requires some sort of adjustment so that it could cope with justice.
The most popular criticism against Haile Selassie’s approach to the Muslim communities is that of Ahmedin. According to him, Haile Selassie had 11 intentional anti-Muslim strategies. The article he wrote in a popular magazine የሙስሊሞች ቅዳይ (Muslim affairs) was well received and circulated in social media. The alleged 11 anti-Muslim strategies paint the regime in a negative light. In an effort to simplify the marginalization tale, the narrative ignored the nuanced, complex, and even contradictory nature of Ethiopian Muslims’ identity. The overall intent of holding a simplified view motivated by its utility and therapeutic value is not without consequence. As Mieder and Scrase (2001, p. 58) remark, “A memory simplified or distorted, as useful or therapeutic as it may be, does not light the path to historical redemption.”

The activists found the last imperial regime guilty of pursuing the proselytism of Christianity via the charity of the EOTC. The charge used one incident and it failed to recognize that historically the EOTC was not a missionary church in the reign of Haile Selassie. The charge against Haile included also the levying of unfair taxes and confiscation of the properties of Muslim businesspersons. With the purpose of reducing dissent and unity among the Muslim communities, the regime dislocated the active members from their native areas into places where they cannot have meaningful influences. The activists presented Haile Selassie’s state as strengthening Christians via supporting their institutions and weakening the Muslim communities by encumbering them with undue administrative difficulties in relation to public matters. The accusation against the state also included that it engaged in the defamation of Islam and Muslims and withheld their right to form a national-level Islamic institution that could represent Ethiopian Muslims.

The activists also charge that the imperial state systematically discriminated against the employment of Muslims in nationally significant public offices related to defense, policing, and security. Indeed, the state gave preferential treatment to Christians over Muslims. As Carmichael notes (2004, p. 227), the state approach was with the intent to counter any Islamic opposition that might generate negative publicity for Ethiopia in the Middle Eastern and Western press. The state constrained the participation of Muslims in politics and closed the possibility of a Muslim king in Ethiopia. The state also controlled the movement of the Muslim communities through declining the provision of passport. It treated them as foreigners rather than as Ethiopians.

What this narrative generally fails to capture is the fact that the measures are not primarily related to Islam per se but rather efforts to stifle any kind of dissent from the population. Notwithstanding the unfairness of the state’s approach in relation to treating them as secondary citizens and political threats, the measures’ motive was primarily political. Religious affiliation had only instrumental value. This is evident in the fact that there were Muslims, even if only a handful, who assumed important positions in the state apparatus. The overall context of the time also featured massive propaganda by Egypt’s Radio Cairo defining the primary alliance of Ethiopian Muslims in a
religious line and the support of secessionist liberation movements (M. Getachew, 2009, p. 46). The tale of the activists also ignores that fact that there were organized movements among Ethiopian Muslims in Eritrea and Somalia (Wudu, 2012, pp. 146-147). The narrative also fails to capture the fact that many Harari supported Lij Iyyäsu, which caused their imprisonment and murder (Carmichael, 2004, p. 224).

The above systematic marginalization narrative contains a few historical facts that do not easily fit into the overall framework that frames Haile Selassie as an enemy against Islam and Muslims. These historical difficulties were the establishment and recognition of Sharia courts by the emperor; the Amharic translation of the Quran; the reality of Muslim ministers, state officials of different capacities and public servants; and the 1964 visit of Emperor Haile Selassie to Sheikh Hussein Shrine, as well as his continued support for the shrine’s Muslim clergy. Of all the historical facts, the most difficult one to neglect is the reality of Muslim Parliamentarians. A review of the biography of Fit’awrari Ahmede, a former Muslim member of Parliament, stated that there were 35 Muslim members of Parliament of a total 210 in 1959 (Birhanu, 2011).

The preface of the second edition of the Amharic Quran provides a short preview of the history of its translation under the reign of Haile Selassie. The initiation of the translation was under the order of the emperor on July 25, 1966, and published in 1968. After briefly mentioning the translation process, the preface laments the failure to distribute them. The failure was intentional and the overall translation process was not to help the Muslim communities. The preface explains the motivation behind the translation and its failure for distribution as follows (NPP, 2005):

*The order of the imperial king to translate the Holy Quran into Amharic was not an act of goodwill towards the Muslim communities, but rather it was to gain a diplomatic friendship with North Africa and the Middle Eastern Islamic nations. Haji Bashir Dawood, who took part in the translation process, witnessed this fact. Now we know even the date when the imperial order was passed prohibiting the import of any Islamic books written in Arabic, so that the Muslim communities would not be enlightened* (My own translation from the original Amharic).

Rather than accepting a nuanced picture of the king, the overall attempt is to nurture a simplistic portrayal that could easily marshal the communities into one and to earn a sense of sympathy from other communities. The claim that Haile Selassie was inherently anti-Islamic, however, fails on a number of grounds. One of those is the offer of scholarships to Harari boys at Täfäri Mekonen School in Addis Ababa (Carmichael, 2004, p. 228). Also during his regime, Harari were accepted in the Ethiopian military, and a few eventually attained high rank (Carmichael, 2004).
Upon return from exile, Haile Selassie formally recognized the Muslim system of law in 1942. Notwithstanding the controversies surrounding it, the regime’s recognition of the Sharia law was beyond doubt (Singer, 1971, pp. 131-132). Muslim activists, such as Ahmedin, for example, report the Islamic courts as a snare to the Muslim communities (Ahmedin, 2010, p. 17):

The demonization effort has also targeted Islam and its institutions. For example, he (the emperor Haile Selassie) interfered in the activities and the verdict of the Sharia court, appointed non-Muslims, and made the court where the law is twisted and weak. At the fall of the regime, Haji Bashir, who used to be a judge in the court, wrote in Bilal magazine, “Many millions who were zealous of their religion and nation thought ‘the establishment of the Sharia court is not to protect Islamic religion but rather slowly to cause the people to hate the religion and leave it.’ It is undeniable that they thought the court as a sham and murmured for ages with a saddened heart (My own translation from the original Amharic).

Emperor Haile Selassie visited the shrine of Dire Sheikh Hussein in 1964. What occasioned his visit is not clear but his subsequent actions were positive. After his visit, the village leaders received a yearly subsidy and got an exemption from state tax on their lands. However, the interpretation of his benevolence among Muslim activists is negative. They say the visit was part of a grand narrative intended to weaken Islam and strong Islamic institutions. Ahmedin, for example, states (Ahmedin, 2010, p. 17):

The state of Haile Selassie followed a strategy that hampered Muslims by attempting to install as leaders of Muslims those involved in worshipping of the dead. He persecuted those who know their Dīn (religion) and defend Muslims’ rights. His financial provisions to Muslims who worship the dead were also attempts to entice the alim (the one who has Islamic knowledge) to follow similar ways. As an example, Emperor Haile Selassie supported the shrine of Dire Sheikh Hussein. He provided a subsidy. He allotted 1,000 Birr to the leaders of the villages of Dire Sheikh as yearly salaries and exempted their 235 (two hundred thirty-five) gasha land from tax9 (My own translation from the original Amharic).

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9 An ancient way of measuring a land in Ethiopia, whose practice varied considerably depending on the type of the land. On average, a gasha may be equivalent to 1,200 meters by 800 meters, or about 80 to 100 acres.
4.6 Charging the Community with Positive Energy

As I have stated in the introductory part of this chapter, the second goal of Ethiopian Muslim activists is to charge their community with positive energy. In this line, the following quotation succinctly captures the approach of Muslim activists (Jemal, 2012b, p. 14):

*Islam, Ethiopia, Muslims, and Habash are at the core of the histories of the good news of Islam based on the Quran (the mission of the last prophet, peace be upon him). Ethiopia is the second nation, only after Saudi Arabia that showed hospitality and received Quranic Islam. More importantly, Ethiopia is a marvelous and lucky nation in which this heavenly Unitarian religion is freely preached (even if many do not notice it). Besides, the primary positive role of the nation was presented as a just Habash state; there were also great personalities in its Islamic history whose name cannot be disassociated from Ethiopia...the many great historical personalities in national Islamic history could also be a source of positive pride for all Ethiopian citizens (irrespective of religious background)* (My own translation from original Amharic).

Taking into account the above quotation and other similar narratives, let us look closely at the themes that emerge to energize the Muslim community. I could note that three major positive themes emerge. The first theme relates to the characterization of the nation. The historical image of the nation is that of just, hospitable, and the second nation that received Islam. The second image is related to the nobility of Ethiopians, evident in the ancestry of prominent personalities in Islam’s formative period. The third image relates to historic Muslim heroes in Ethiopia. With the exception of the second image, the Ethiopian ancestry of prominent personalities of Islam, the other two images are contentions held at varying degrees.

4.6.1 The second nation that received Quranic Islam

The above quoted statement of an Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora delegate aptly summarizes the gist of Muslim activists’ positive use of the historical repository. The quotation makes more sense if I note that the narrative is part of Islamic fundamentalism, whose footing is progressively increasing among the urban Muslim youths. In this fundamentalist flavor, Islam is set in contradistinction with Christianity, with the earlier replacing the latter as the final revelation. The terms “Quranic-based Islam” and “heavenly Unitarian religion” are deliberate choices.

The narrative is counter to Ethiopian Christianity, which is bible-based and Trinitarian. It is assertion of the superiority of Islam over Christianity as the final revelation from God. The implication is that Islam as the final good news corrects distortions in Christianity. In this line of
reasoning, the image of Ethiopia turns into a privileged nation. Creatively, thus, the historical reality is inversely reinterpreted. Islam is thus a gift to Ethiopia and the nation is “lucky.” The imaging construes the past as mutually beneficiary both to the land and to Islam.

The narrative does emphasize the first Hijrah narrative. It asserts that the global Muslim community owes much to the nation. Corollary to the notion is the construing of the nation as the founders of Islam. In doing so, not only do they unburden the Muslim community from the Christian community’s perception that it is the Christians who saved Islam, but they also energize Ethiopian Muslim communities as rightful owners of the history of saving Islam. The narrative strongly emphasizes the conversion of the king into Islam. An Ethiopian Muslim activist poet captured the sense of pride as follows (Munir, 2012):

Let us look closely into the image of the nation. The narrative introduces the concept of justice into Ethiopia’s image and investigates diachronically its application. In the narrative’s historical assessment, Ethiopia as a nation had a just system that permitted freedom of worship to the asylum seekers. The past tense in the narrative also invokes the history of marginalization. The king is extolled as a symbol of justice taking care of the asylum seekers. The lands symbolized by the king’s action signify freedom. In the story, Najāshī ends up converting into Islam. The conversion of the king to Islam, however, is greatly contested among both historians and Ethiopian Christians.

The first Hijrah narrative of Ethiopian Muslims is a history of which Muslims are proud. The significance of the event is multifaceted. Ethiopian Muslims love the story of Al- Najāshī. It is this story that justifies the image that Ethiopia is the second nation that become Muslim and the first nation that had a Muslim king. Many Ethiopian Islamic institutions are named after Najāshī as a way of honoring him. Ethiopian Diaspora organizations in Europe used the name for an Islamic radio station in Sweden, and a prominent private Islamic publication house is also named after Najāshī.

The Najāshī story portrays the nation as a land of justice and a land that protected Islam at its very infancy. The First Hijrah Foundation website proudly states:
In Islamic history and tradition, Ethiopia (Abbyssinia or Al-Habash) is known as the "Haven of the First Migration or Hijrah." For Muslims, Ethiopia was synonymous with freedom from persecution and emancipation from fear. Ethiopia was a land where its Christian king, Negus or Al- Najāshī, was a person renowned for justice and in whose land human rights were cherished (FHF).

In relation with the formative period of Islam, there is also a great deal of emphasis about the uniqueness of the nation’s contribution. Unlike the Quraish that lied against the prophet and attempted to kill him, the Ethiopian king showed hospitality and protection to his followers. The land also became the second nation, only after Mecca, where Islam was preached freely. The story ends with the conversion, as Najāshī is granted the honor of being the first person ever who received Islam without meeting the prophet face to face. Najāshī was the first Muslim king ever. The story also notes the rebellion of the people against his conversion and his unsuccessful travel to meet the prophet in person. The death of Najāshī was also the reason for the introduction of Salat Algayb or Šalāt al-Janāzah.

Ethiopian Christians are very critical of Muslims’ use of the Najāshī story as a king who eventually turned to Islam. The Gülen movement of Turkey thought of Najāshī as a great personality in Ethiopian history symbolizing justice that unites Ethiopian Muslims and Ethiopian Christians to promote peaceful coexistence and dialogue. The movement was insensitive to the Ethiopian Christians’ perception of the narrative. Among Ethiopian Christians, the tendency is that whoever insists that Najāshī converted is an extremist that intends to Islamize Ethiopian history. The use by the Gülen movement of the name “Najāshī Ethio-Turkish International Schools” was very offensive to Ethiopian Christians. One of the reasons the Ethiopian Interreligious Council stopped its partnership with the Gülen movement is the use of Najāshī, which is usually perceived as a sign of Islamic radicalism.

Deakon Daniel Kibret, a prominent EOTC member and a social activist, presented a paper to the EOTC’s clergy and the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Diaspora in the United States about Islamic radicalism in Ethiopia titled እክራሪ እስልምና፡የኢትዬጲያ ከርስትና እስቸጋሪው ወተና (Radical Islam: A difficult test for the Ethiopian Christianity). In the presentation he remarked, “Some radical Muslims spread the rumor that King Ashama converted to Islam. Doing good work is the culture of Ethiopia. The first government in the world’s history that provided asylum was an Ethiopian government.” For Daniel, the conversion is just a fable, a later invention. Reportedly, the EOTC synod, the highest authority of the EOTC church, issued a statement on April 24, 1999. For the EOTC synod, the story of Al- Najāshī is a later creation that does not have historical basis (Daniel, 2007).
Within the scholarly discourse, Erlich suggests that the Najāshī story created an Islamic dilemma for Muslims beginning with the formative period of Islam. According to his thesis, based on which part of the story is emphasized, the Al- Najāshī story either construes Ethiopia as Islam’s failure or a land of neutrality. In effect, conceiving the story as Islam’s missionary failure nurtures a negative image towards Ethiopia and Ethiopian Christians, while construing it as a sign of hospitality invokes a positive predisposition (Erlich, 2006, pp. 233-235). The overall tendency of Ethiopian Muslims is that of the latter kind, with a great deal of emphasis on the fact that it is the only country that was categorically exempt from Islamic jihad.

When one observes the details of the Al- Najāshī story, it is not hard to note that the extolled qualities are primarily assigned to the king. The story bestows unique character to the king in contradistinction to the king’s relatives, the Christian priests in his royal court, and the king’s Christian subjects. This is evident in the narratives. Najāshī was the only son of his father. His relatives were powermongers. It is his uncle, who had 12 children, who killed his father to secure the throne for himself and his progeny. The evil also extends to the royal court who sold the young prince to slavery. His later return to the throne is also seen as occurring only because there was a leadership void in the land.

The injunction of the prophet to his followers speaks of the goodness of the king, not of the people. The Islamic tradition says, "a king rules without injustice, a land of truthfulness – until God leads us to a way out of our difficulty." The emphasis is basically upon the justice of the king and his protection. The priests at the court were also painted negatively, except those who later converted to Islam upon meeting the prophet in Medina. In this characterization, unlike the king, the priests were beguiled by the gifts and bribes of the Quraish delegation. It is also these court clerics that instigated rebellion against him when he converted to Islam. The subjects of the king are also more faithful to the clerics than the just king.

Ethiopian Christians are very critical of narratives that capitalize on the Al- Najāshī story. A Christian apologist site presents the motive of the story as follows (Answeringethiomuslims, 2015):

*The issue of Al-Najāshī is not only about truthfulness. If it were only about distorting a historical fact, it would not have been a worrisome matter. The desire of Muslims is not, as some sincere people naively think, the intent to bestow “due respect” on him as a hospitable king. This story accuses Ethiopian Christians of tormenting and killing. Its mission is to frame Ethiopian Christians among Muslims as an object of hatred (My own translation from original Amharic).*
The emotion and image the story of Najāshī invokes is not only a sense of pride in being a land of justice. It has also a sense of bewilderment and estrangement. Muslims activists wonder how a nation that received Islam even long before the holy city Mecca ended up treating Muslims as foreigners or citizens with secondary status. In this line the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora delegates remark (EMDAC):

About 1,400 years ago, Ethiopia was able to establish a just order far better than the order established in the 21st century society. The prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) aptly described the then Abyssinian (Ethiopian) king as “a king in whose realm no one is wronged.” The degree of fairness, truthfulness, and civility one must exhibit to establish a just system worthy of such prophetic praise is obvious. The just system that was in place at that time, in this land of ours, was able to provide a safe haven for those [persecuted early Muslims] who were in dire need of a place of freedom and justice, thus transcending the bounds of time. The tragic situation that we are currently in would compel us to inquire, “Why is our country, which was the flagship of justice at a time when people had limited awareness, turning a blind eye when the prevailing thrust in the rest of the world is towards democracy and justice?” (My own translation from original Amharic)

Ethiopian Muslims have struggled to answer the underlying reason for historical marginalization of Muslims from the nation’s life. The question has never been easy for Muslim activists. Part of the complexity of the answer is the recognition that the proposal should maintain a delicate balance between religious traditions, eyewitness testimonies, and the need for peaceful coexistence. The overall direction seems to comply with the contemporary government’s direction. In the state narrative, the religious inequality in Ethiopian history is the product of states that do not accommodate their own religious diversity. The narrative also creates a sharp distinction between the political history and the people’s history. It also discounts the Christian religious identity as a prime cause of the monarchs. The emphasis of the state has been the political and economic factors as major causes of conflict between the Muslim sultanates and the Christian kingdoms. The negotiation of narratives has not been that easy.

The general stances of Ethiopian Muslim activists seem to accept the conceptual distinctions between the people and the king or between the social history and the political history of the nation. In this line of reasoning, the Diaspora delegates of Ethiopian Muslims remark, “since I have to see separately the history of government from the history of the people, I do not believe that the historic Christian and Muslim relations in Ethiopia were seriously flawed relations” (EMDAC, 2007). The distinction of Ethiopian history from social utility does have a positive value in the image production
of the other. It implies that in the narratives of activists, Christian Ethiopians are not inherently bad and evil, which seems to be the case, as Muslims with a fundamentalist flavor tend to depict Jews as inherently evil.

Such an approach basically seems to ease the communal tension among Ethiopian Muslims and Christians. The scapegoat is likely to become the previous states rather than Christians. The motivation for marginalization of the state also turns from religious to economic. At this juncture, however, Muslim activists deviate from both the mainstream historical narratives as well as the state. Part of the difficulty of accepting economic motives over religious motives derives from the allegiance of the EOTC with the imperial states. Looking at the fusion of the state with the church, the religious cause is emphasized more often than the economic one (Jemal, 2012a, p. 15).

In the post-Najāshī age, especially the Solomonic dynasty that replaced the Zagwëe dynasty, Ethiopians experienced various anti-peace, religiously motivated political problems. The governing religious political systems exhibited various measures of oppression and violation of rights, both openly and in disguise. This continued up to the last millennium in various forms and after 1,000 years was replaced with the non-religious Derg government (My own translation from original Amharic).

As the above quotation clearly shows, underlying the problems of Ethiopian Muslims was the state. The defining feature that motivated the state to be anti-Islam was religious, not economic. The anti-peace sentiment of the state, various oppressive measures, and rights violations all are linked to the religiously instigated motives rather than an economic interest. Even if it is not openly stated, what the critique objects to is the historic Ethiopian Christianity. I should also note that the grand narrative uses the inclusive language of Ethiopians rather than Ethiopian Muslims. The narrative, however, puts all the ills on the Christian kingdom and absolves the Muslim sultanates, who also caused trauma upon the Christian kingdom and the Christian population. The approach of the activists in the reconstruction of the past seems to ignore the feeling such grand narratives invoke for Christians.

Some Muslim activists are even more vocal in pointing out the EOTC as the major culprit of the historical injustice (Yimer, 2009):

In Ethiopia, state and religion have been two faces of a coin. For centuries, the church shaped the type of system that had come to exist. It is often said that political rulers used religion to advance their selfish agenda. In the Ethiopian case, however, the reverse seems to hold true. The Church has been instrumental in bringing about and sustaining the power that
it believed would advance its agenda. As a result, it has positioned itself as the sole guardian of the country and maker of its history (My own translation from original Amharic).

Notwithstanding the symbiotic relationship of the state and the church, it is also historically inaccurate either to conflate the two as if both are the same or to assign positive power asymmetry to the church over and above the state. It should be noted that the relationship of the church and the state has never been one of equals. There always has been power asymmetry with the alliance of the state and the church. The few historical incidents that seem to paint the church as the most powerful organization that could counter the state’s actions effectively are not historically true. Those incidents at best reflect the fact that opposition forces to the monarchical state co-opted the church and the alliance had an impact.

Those narratives that perceive the role of the church as having the final say on political matters confuse the status of the Ethiopian church with that of the European church, which played a significant role in influencing the state. In the Ethiopian case, however, the incidents that seem to paint the church with extraordinary power reflect the presence of strong opposition parties that contested the throne and the church using the opportunity for her own ends. A very good example is Emperor Libne Dingel (1508-1540), whom Abunä Peter accused of being doctrinally deviant, thus in a way revoking his divine rights as a king to be feared and respected. Budge aptly notes, “… though the ban of the Abunä Peter made Za Dingel ‘accursed’ in the eyes of the Orthodox, it did not appear to do him any harm, and Za Selassie prepared to supplement the curses of the church with the weapons of war” (Budge, 2014, p. 379).

Historically speaking, then, assuming that the church is a powerful institution that affects the day-to-day royal court decisions is unreasonable. In the symbiotic relations with the state, what mattered most were doctrinal issues, the question of ethical purity, and policies that directly affect both the status and the resources of the church. Equating the power of the Ethiopian church with the medieval European pope’s influence has no historical corroborations. It is not the church that had the supreme position in the relationship. After all, in a way the monarchs took spiritual leadership as evidenced by the way in which they have invoked and presided over councils on matters of faith and appointed major figures in the church.

The symbiotic relationship with the Solomonic dynasty furnished an ideological base, a political theology that legitimized the monarchs as divine appointees in return for protection and resources to the church. In fact, historically there are few instances where the Abunä dared to rebuke kings. A good example is the churches’ negative stance towards Amdä Seyon for his polygamy. The other occasion also relates to monks who refused to prostrate themselves before the king. In both of these cases the result was exile, imprisonment, flogging, or assassination (Levine, 2014, p. 252). These and
similar actions cast doubt on the thesis that the church had the ultimate say on the matter of faith in the monarchical period.

4.6.2 Ethiopian ancestry of great Islamic personalities

The second historical issue that is greatly emphasized among Muslim activists is the Ethiopian origin of prominent personalities in Islam. Ethiopian Muslims are also very proud of Bilal. Bilal symbolizes a sign of perseverance. He is one of the first few men who received Islam early and a person upon whom the title of the first muezzin was bestowed. As a result, there are radio stations and clubs formed in his name to show respect. A woman who nursed the prophet is an Ethiopian, and the fact that he used to call her his mother is a story that circulates. It was indeed a great honor for Ethiopian Muslims that she nursed the prophet and he treated her favorably.

The extolling of the Ethiopian ancestry of great Islamic personalities seems to have greater potential in the interreligious dialogue of Ethiopian Muslims and Christians. Ethiopian Christians readily accept these narratives without problems (Daniel, 2007). Ethiopians in general tend to see their image as unique and heroic. Consequently, the heroic virtue of Ethiopian ancestry feeds positively into the interest of Ethiopians. The value of the Ethiopian ancestry of Muslims for building a more positive image is also somehow undermined among Muslims activists who have a fundamentalist orientation and see their role as agents of trans-ethnic integration of diverse Ethiopian Muslims. The fear of the activists makes sense since post-1991 Ethiopian politics emphasizes ethnicity. The Ethiopian ancestry or origin might undermine the imagined trans-ethnic Islam both in Ethiopia and throughout the world.

4.6.3 Ethiopian Muslim heroes

The third positive image that Ethiopian Muslim activists promote derives from national heroic figures. Here, the project coincides with the post-1991 ethnic politics of the state. It has become common that Ethiopian ethnicities look for historical personalities that fought for the cause of their communities. In this regard, the heroic figure is Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (1506-1543). Ethiopian Christians tend to refer to him as Ahmed Gragn (Ahmed, the left-handed). Ethiopian Muslim activists rewrote their history. Given his negative image among the Ethiopian Christians, however, his story invokes polemics towards the church. In relation to him, the EOTC becomes the object of polemics. The church is set as an institution that tends to demonize heroic figures of history with a non-Orthodox background.

In an effort to negotiate the reimaging of Imam Ahmad, the activists side with the non-Orthodox religions in Ethiopia. The activists reason that the church demonized the 10th century Youdit Gudit, a
semi-legendary queen of Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews), only because she was a Jew. In a similar line, they also point out that the church painted her as an enemy of Ethiopian emperor Susenyos (1606-1632) only because he converted to Catholicism. The overall effort of the activists is to dismiss those historical materials that negatively paint Imam Ahmad as non-Ethiopian and a destructive force. Notwithstanding the criticism that the church’s historical records have a bias, denouncing all the records of the church as totally unreliable and picking only Islamic sources that depict the imam positively does not add value for constructive dialogue.

In relation to his image, the depicting of the EOTC church is as an institution that demonized anything other than Orthodox Christianity. In the new historical revision of the activists, the imam changes from an “outside invader” to “a young man who has a deep love for his country.” His brutal actions against Christians and the church are at times rationalized on the ground that they were merely responses to the previous injustices against his contemporaries. Others dismiss the charges as inventions. In the new assessment, he contributed to the nation. One of his contributions is the ruling of the nation in accordance with the Sharia law. Even though they do not request the endorsement of Sharia for all Ethiopians, Ethiopian Muslim activists speak of it as the best rule by which humans could govern themselves. From Imam Ahmad’s historical legacies, the narratives also discount the forced Islamization he pursued. In the narrative, what happened is rather the peaceful re-Islamization of the previous sultanates and those Christians who were willing. Historically, areas in the south like Bale, Dawaro, and Hadiya were Muslim sultanates upon whom Christianity was imposed.

In the narrative, the imam is not an invader but rather a hero who fought for defending his rights and those of fellow Ethiopian Muslims. He is extolled as a great personality that unified Ethiopia from the present Somalia to Eritrea. With a sense of pride, the narratives indicate that he governed Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti. He was a mujahidin, one who struggled for the sake of Allah and Islam. He was good news for Muslims who were repeatedly insulted and mistreated by the Christian kingdom. In the narration, however, his destruction has been overlooked. The narration is also very critical of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the book written by Abba Inbaqom.

Abba Inbaqom was a prominent scholar in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. Formerly, he was Muslim and from Yemen. Later, he abandoned Islam and converted to Orthodox Christianity. He was baptized at Debre Libanos with the name of the prophet Habakkuk (“Inbaqom” in Ge’ez). The baptism of Abba Inbaqom took place not long before the battle of Imam Ahmed and the Ethiopian Christian empire. The writings of Abba Inbaqom paint the imam as the one that burned monasteries and churches besides forcing the Christian community to convert to Islam. The role of Inbaqom was also prominent since the EOTC clergy were not equipped to engage in polemics with the sheikhs from Adal. Abba Inbaqom was naturally well versed in both the teachings of Islam and the Orthodox

10 Youdit Gudit’s identity as a Jew is a matter of speculation
faith and traveled from place to place during the war strengthening the faith of the beleaguered Orthodox followers by his preaching.

The extolling of Gragn is not acceptable to Ethiopian Christians. In the narrative of Ethiopian Christians, Ahmed Gragn is portrayed as an enemy of Ethiopia. The negotiation of the Muslim activists to present him as Ethiopian easily succeeded with the state. The Harari regional government translated and published *Fithu al Habesh*, the eyewitness account of Imam Ahmad ad-Din Ahmad bin ’Abd al-Qader, as a history of the people of Harari in Ethiopia. The title assigned for the book is not the direct translation, i.e., the conquest of Abyssinia. The new title is ለበሻን ይማቅናት ዋመቻ (*The campaign for formation of the state of Ahabash*), construing the military campaign as an earlier effort of state building. The narrative is against the view that it is Menelik II first succeeded to unify the contemporary Ethiopia.

The negotiation with Christians did not succeed. Still many Christians frame the imam as Somali rather than as Ethiopian. Most Ethiopian Christians, however, still refuse to hold the view that his motivations were primarily economic and his actions were retaliations against the injustice of Ethiopian Christian kings. Among Ethiopian Christians, both the imam’s motivation and the support he marshaled from Muslim nations signify the face of radical Islam and the danger it poses to Christian Ethiopia (Daniel, 2007). The sentiment of such views is succinctly captured in the following quotation (H. Getachew, 2014):

> Ethiopia has not yet fully revived from “Ahmed Gragn’s tenderness,” a chilling devastation of Muslim forces on Christian Ethiopia. Even though the human and material costs of this invasion are infinite, what I always regret is rather the loss of some of the oldest church scriptures, only whose titles have remained with us today. The Muslims had no reason to devour Christians except for their Jihad. The Christians established and ran the country’s government. Some tribes, like Somalis and Yifates, living in some remote parts of the country accepted Islam, and they were allowed to govern themselves while in the Ethiopian state. Even when we see it today, what better options were available for the imperial government than this? The main objective of the Jihad war waged on the Christians was to convert them all to Islam thereby administering them under the Sharia law. The Muslims never thought of taking up only government power and let the Christians rule themselves.

Here is another Christian apologist’s remark about the war (Beyagebagnal, 2012, pp. 55-56):

> As the name itself implies, one of the most destructive wars in Ethiopia was Ahmed Gragn’s war. This war was a war against Christianity with the sponsorship of Saudi Arabia
under the Somali Ahmed Gragn. The period was when many Christians were Islamized, except 1/3 of the population, many churches were burned down and those who refused the conversion were slaughtered (My own translation from original Amharic).

4.7 Conclusion

Using collective memory, I have pursued the objective of uncovering the contemporary Muslim activism in Ethiopia. In relation to self-understanding of Ethiopian Muslims activists, I looked into the overall critiques towards the mainstream Ethiopian history, the objectives they pursued while negotiating the meaning of the past, and how the meaning-making process could affect the identity of the Muslim community. In order to achieve the above objectives, the research examined collective memories that are advanced among the Muslim community through Ethiopian Muslim activists.

In light of the overall objectives, I looked into the criticism by Ethiopian Muslim activists of the available Ethiopian history in order to find omissions and commissions in the voices of Muslim activists. In order to identify the omissions and commissions, the research also compared and contrasted the approaches of Ethiopian Muslim activists with Ethiopianist scholars. In the endeavor, we noted that there were many levels of negotiations.

In line with Ethiopianist scholars, the activists emphasize the marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims’ history in Ethiopian studies. Unlike the Ethiopianist scholars, the activists reject the proposal that the historical marginalization of Islam from Ethiopian studies is due to the prevalence of a Semitist centrist paradigm. The activists tend to accept the state’s proposal that there is a difference between the political history of Ethiopian Christian monarchs and social history. They, however, reject the thesis that the overall motive of the Christian kings was mainly political and economic. In the opinions of the activists, the underlying cause of the marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims is their religious identity. For the activists, whatever kind of injustice was committed in the past against Ethiopian Muslims was mainly because they were Muslims.

In the attempt at negotiation, the activists present their cases via the postmodernist view of history that historical realities are perspectives and where we stand determines the meaning. The activists emphasize that the predicaments of the available political history are the product of three distinct but inextricably intertwined elements, namely the non-Islamic identity of the historians, their Christian perspectives, and the dominance of Christian sources. In their attempt to reconstruct alternate historical narratives, the activists heavily borrow from the political narrative of the contemporary state that construes the ethnic homogenization projects of the monarchical states as causes of marginalization. The overlaps of religious and ethnic identity among some ethnicities have also paved a way to such conceptions. In the process of negotiating with the state, the activists reject the state’s approach towards history that subsumes religious identity under ethnic identity. In the
narratives of the activists, ethnic identity has secondary importance and used to advance the cause of Islamic identity.

The activists point out that the majority of Ethiopian history scholars are Christians and therefore the available scholarly works are the handiwork of Christians, not Muslims. In the process of mainstream historical reconstruction, thus, Christians are privileged and the available histories are devoid of the Ethiopian Muslims’ perspectives. The activists also point out that the shortcoming of the available history derives from the fact that Ethiopian historical works heavily relied on the Christian chroniclers. To them, therefore, Ethiopian history is largely a Christian perspective by Christian scholars from Christian sources and in some way biased against Muslims.

The implication of the narrative templates through which the activists criticize the mainstream historical narrative is not trivial. It clearly indicates that the counternarratives advanced among the Muslim activists go against the consensual approach that dominates the mainstream historiography. In an attempt to negotiate the past, the activists provide a proposal that turns some historical figures from foes into heroes. The alternative narratives advanced, however, become equally problematic to the Christians. The reconstruction projects of the activists are mostly by Muslims, from Muslim perspectives, and mainly employing Arabic religious sources. They repeat exactly what the activists are critical. Most of all, the reconstructions ignore the available local Christian sources as unreliable while accepting the Arabic sources as entirely accurate without critically engaging with the sources. The project thus becomes an ideological project, albeit a Muslim one.

I also found that the overall act of collective remembering shows traces of the concerns of the present. In line with the postulation of collective memories, in the retelling and reconstruction of the past there lies a present concern. The images of the past are designed to invoke sympathy from the non-Muslim community and supply a vitalizing energy to the Muslim community. The way in which the two inextricably intertwined objectives are framed makes the claims of Ethiopian Muslim activists contestable. The tendency among activists to interpret all historical injustice and inequalities as “only because they were Muslims” makes it impossible to realize the goal of sympathy from Ethiopian Christians and rather fosters a sense of suspicion that vengeance is being nurtured and that the overall affair is part of Islamic extremism.

The second objective is the goal of charging the Muslim community with more positive energy. With the exception of Muslims of Ethiopian ancestry, the two other narratives employed to energize the Muslim community have spurred many controversies. The story of Al- Najāshī, especially the tradition that speaks of his conversion and the subsequent rejection by his own people, has met opposition from Christians. The claim that Muslim national heroes would have been role models if not demonized by the church makes the stories untenable among Christians.
The construing of Imam Ahmed of the 16th century as a hero who fought for the sake of Islam and Allah is unacceptable among Christians. For the Christians, the extolling of Ahmed Gragn as a virtuous king is equivalent to endorsing militant jihad against Christians and willfully becoming part of modern jihad. The activists’ claim that Haile Selassie, the last emperor of Ethiopia, was allegedly motivated by a religious cause and worked to estrange the Muslim community from the political, economic, educational, and social life of the modern world puts aside the historical nuances. Notwithstanding the marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims from Haile Selassie’s administration, the underplaying of the political factor and the magnification of the religious identity as a cause of political marginalization has not earned acceptance among Christians.
Chapter Five: The EPRDF’S Depiction of Ethiopian Religious History: Inventions, Contests, and Negotiations

5.1 Introduction

The overall objective of this chapter is to establish the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front’s (EPRDF) overarching depiction of Ethiopian religious history. Embarking on this task, among others, requires unpacking the formation of the EPRDF and the founding political myth. I begin from the formation to depict the power dynamics within the coalition in order to show how the hegemony of TPLF in the EPRDF informed the formative views of TPLF about religion to carry forward into the coalition. After a brief overview of the EPRDF, I look into the ethno-linguistic politics that it champions and sustains. The overall aim of examining the EPRDF’s ethno-linguistic narratives is to identify the broader narrative structure and its utility. I also examine the depiction of Ethiopia’s religious history that the state intends to subsume under the EPRDF’s ethno-linguistic politics. The political myth of the EPRDF that construes ethnicity at the core assigns secondary importance to religious group identity.

The discussion of the political myth, the preferred reading of the past, and the intended effect it seeks to elicit, provides the overall context under which the EPRDF’s depiction of Ethiopia’s religious history is subsumed. In examining the political myth of the EPRDF, the attempt is not to assess the truthfulness of the accounts. Peterson’s (2013, p. 305) remarks about the nature of political myth guide my research. According to Peterson, truthfulness is not that relevant for political impact. I conceive the EPRDF’s narratives mainly as its own reflections about Ethiopia’s past for achieving certain political goals in the present. Given that the EPRDF’s narratives also stretch into the future, they also reflect what the EPRDF envisions for the nation’s future. In examining them, I discuss particularly the narrative of religious marginalization.

The use of the nation’s historical repository, including the constitutions, to legitimize the EPRDF’s rule inevitably requires us to look into its images of the past. I examine the creative use of the past in relation to the present and the envisioned future. In unpacking the use of Ethiopian constitutional histories, I note that there is continuity and discontinuity with the previous states. In relation to continuity, I argue that unlike the EPRDF’s claim of discontinuity, the legacies of the previous states continued, albeit differently. The EPRDF’s religious freedom and equality via the secularism principles it espouses effectively and increasingly reduced the public sphere within which the religious institutions could participate.

The EPRDF’s depiction of Ethiopia’s religious history is not the narrative in Ethiopia. The diverse religious communities also breed their own versions. The versions display varying degrees of compliance with the EPRDF’s portrayal of the past. Like any other reconstructions of collective
memory, the process of collective memory formation by the EPRDF exhibits anachronism, parochialism, and presentism. There are inventions, contests, and negotiations. In the formation of the collective memories, the end of the Cold War, the Internet, and mobile technology played a crucial role. The end of the Cold War opened up the country. With the increased opportunities for mobility, new narratives that challenge the old ones emerged. The Internet and mobile technology, where modalities of networking and information exchanges were significantly altered, brought to an end the official history texts’ monopoly in forming and sustaining the collective memories. Consistent with superdiversity, then, the identity of Ethiopian Muslims become dynamic and less cohesive. The dynamism is not without effect; rather the religious landscape is increasingly becoming more one of contestation, difference, and conflict.

The overall endeavor of this chapter is to show that the creative reconstruction of the past is not devoid of the present, but rather the heavy imprint of the present is evident in the reconstructed image about the past. Thus, in the unpacking of the EPRDF’s narrative, the overall intent is to identify inventions, to show contests, and to underline the outcomes of negotiations in the efforts of constructing a usable past.

5.2 Background of the EPRDF

In the following section, I provide a brief background of the EPRDF. In this regard, the first section (5.2.1) emphasizes the history of its formation and the underlying motivation for the coalition. Following that (5.2.2), I highlight the senior-junior relationship between the ethnic-based member parties of the EPRDF and the rest of the ethnic-based parties that allied with it. Given the decisive imprint of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war on the nature of EPRD, I also discuss (5.2.3) the war and its aftermath. In the final sub-section, I look at the democratization process and the political space (5.2.4) in the EPRDF.

5.2.1 Formation

The EPRDF is a coalition of four ethnic-based parties from the most populated regions, namely Tigray, Amhara, Southern Peoples Nations and Nationalities (SPPN), and Oromia. These regions account for more than three-quarters of the total population (Kassahun, 1995, p. 132). Muslims’ percentage representations in these four regions are 3.96%, 17.15%, 47.54%, and 14.12%, respectively. With the exception of Oromia, where Christians exceed Muslims only by 1%, Christians are the majority in the remaining three member regions of the coalition. Even in the Oromia region, where Christians and Muslims are virtually equal, the religious diversity distribution is uneven throughout the region. The pocket areas of Oromia where Muslims are predominant and
the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam has gained strong footing are the source of most of the intra-religious and interreligious conflicts.

Among the coalition members, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) is the oldest. Its establishment dates back to February 1975. It began as a small guerrilla band by Tigrayan youth that managed to effectively amalgamate the Tigrayan nationalism sentiment (the domination of Amhara and Tigray’s loss of autonomy and independence) with the question of nationalistic rhetoric in the 1960s and 1970s student movement (Semahagn, 1998, pp. 107-111; Vaghan, 2015, p. 287; Young, 1998, pp. 50-51).

The formation of the EPRDF is relatively recent compared to TPLF. It dates back to 1989, only 2 years before the fall of the Derg. In 1989, TPLF took over the Tigray area from the socialist military state. The new alliance of TPLF was a political necessity to sustain its victory over the Tigray province and to achieve its newly modified vision of Ethiopia. At its formation, TPLF’s agenda was making Tigray independent and establishing a democratic republic of Tigray (Young, 2006, p. 99). Later, however, in the spirit of pragmatism TPLF realized that sustaining the independence of Tigray necessitated the overthrow of the military socialist state. The military victory of the Eritrean and Tigrayan liberation fronts of the late 1980s saw the tide of the war turn in their favor as TPLF captured Tigray.

Advancing beyond Tigray required legitimacy TPLF had never built before. As the Tigray people’s party, TPLF had only the representation of 7% of the Ethiopia’s population. In 1989, for strategic advantage, TPLF formally forged an alliance with an Amhara-dominated organization then called the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Movement (EPRDM).11 Young (2006, p. 168) aptly summarizes the driving motivation of the new alliance like this: “Clearly a major consideration in the TPLF’s alliance with EPRDM was fears that Tigrayan would not be readily accepted as liberators when operating outside their home province.”

In the renewed vision of governing Ethiopia, rather than making Tigray independent, TPLF had looked into a Stalinist nationalities policy as the model for a multinational Ethiopia (Clapham, 1990, p. 256). A year after the alliance, in March 1990, Meles Zenawi traveled to the United States. At that time, he was the head of TPLF and the newly created EPRDF. Reportedly, he renounced the Marxism-Leninism allegiance in order to get the support of the United States (Beken, 2012, p. 103). The abrupt ending of the Marxist-Leninist ideology of TPLF was because of the end of the Cold War. On the ground of pragmatism, thus, the party advocated a market friendly policy in the early 1990s. From this time on, the US showed unwavering support for Meles as one of the “New Leaders” in Africa that could instill hope in its citizens.

11In 1994, however, EPRDM renamed itself as Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) in line with TPLF’s ethnic nationalism.
As the revolution advanced south, a political organization that represented the Oromo people became a necessity. The Oromo outnumber every other ethnicity in Ethiopia. The ethnic members also have a strong feeling of marginalization and subjugation from the late 19th and 20th century centralization efforts of the monarchs. Among the Oromo people group, it is common to characterize the expansion of Menelik II as colonial conquest. To increase legitimacy among the Oromo people, the creation of the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) was a necessity. TPLF’s allies, particularly OPDO, were mainly former prisoners of war in the TPLF camps (Samatar, 2007, p. 1134).

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which had been fighting against the socialist state since 1975 with a secessionist agenda, did not join the new coalition even though it allied with it in the formation of the transitional state. The alliance of the two, however, did not last long. The OLF not only boycotted the 1992 regional level election but also took up arms against the EPRDF on the ground that the EPRDF monopolized the political process and rejected a multinational Ethiopia in favor of an independent Oromia. Later in 1994 the Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (SEPDM), which represents a collection of numerous ethnic parties in the south, joined the front. Before the 1995 national parliamentary election, thus, the EPRDF effectively transformed itself into a political party that represents three-quarters of its population.

5.2.2 Senior-junior relations

Even though the EPRDF is a coalition of four ethnic-based parties, the relation among the parties is far from egalitarian. From the very outset, the coalition was engineered by TPLF to give itself national political scope and legitimacy (Medhane & Young, 2003, p. 398). Due to the historic context of TPLF and the vanguard nature of the party as keepers of the revolution, TPLF – or more specifically its central committee – is the very core of the EPRDF. In terms of ethnic demographic representation, however, TPLF is the minority within the EPRDF. The senior-junior relationship in the front, however, has farther-reaching consequences than any other criteria in affecting the balance of power among the parties. Semahagn (1998, p. 127) succinctly describes the lasting implication of the formation of the front by saying, “The imbalance of power that was apparent during the formation of the coalition largely continued after the front controlled political power in the country.”

The EPRDF also formed an alliance with ethnic-based parties of the remaining relatively less populated five regions. With the exception of Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz, Harari, Somalia, and Afar are predominantly Muslims. Gambella is almost entirely Christians and in Benishangul-Gumuz Muslims account for 45%, just 2% less than Christians. In fact, the allied regions’ parties are

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12 In May 2011, the Ethiopian Parliament outlawed OLF, Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), Ginbot 7, Al-Qaeda, and al Shabaab and classified them as terrorist organizations.
not full-fledged front members but are clearly under the influence of the EPRDF. The creation of these parties was no different from the junior members of the EPRDF. As a result, the parties’ legitimacy within their localities is not that strong. There is a widespread perception that the allied parties are instruments of TPLF devoid of their own power, to the extent that securing influence within their own party requires a strong personal affiliation with senior TPLF members. The cost of such a relation, among other factors, hinges on loyalty to TPLF.

Due to the allegation that the other member parties are a creation of TPLF and to the continued unbalanced relation in the alliance, these parties continue to suffer deficits of legitimacy in their respective regional constituencies (Krylow, 1994, p. 236). As stated above, TPLF also has strong control over allied parties. For example, the Somali People Democratic Party (SPDP), like junior members of the EPRDF, suffers a legitimacy deficit in the Somali region, where the popular perception is that its leadership constantly depends on instruction and backing from the EPRDF (Hagmann, 2012, p. 65). TPLF has used various means to exert control over the regions, and more so, before 2001, the mechanism was through TPLF appointees that are acting in the capacity of advisors to the regions.

5.2.3 Democracy and political space

After 2001, the EPRDF showed practical steps towards the democratization process and attempted to conduct a nearly democratic election in 2005. In the new democratic election arrangement, opposition parties advocated Pan-Ethiopian nationhood as opposed to EPRDF ethnic-based politics. The result was unexpected; especially in the cities, the EPRDF lost many of its seats. Opposition parties, however, were unhappy with the announced results. As a result, they called for public unrest, to which the EPRDF brutally responded by killing about 200 individuals. Some party members boycotted the result on the ground that the election was unfair. This provided a second chance for the EPRDF to win back some of the seats it lost earlier. The post-2005 election period witnessed the imprisonment of party members of the opposition party who boycotted their seats on the ground of attempting to topple the state by unconstitutional means; they were later released with a presidential pardon.

The unfortunate consequence of this period was the narrowing down of political space through various proclamations and directives that constrain the voice of dissent from opposition parties, journalists, and human rights activists. In effect, even those opposition members that joined the Parliament became practically inept. With the decreased political space, the EPRDF and its alliance secured 99.6 of the Parliament in the 2010 election. In the 2010 election, opposition parties won only one seat and only the independent private candidate won one more seat. Thus, every tone of the state in a way is the tone of the EPRDF. Much more in the 2015 election, the EPRDF secured absolute
control by taking all the available seats. Thus, in the following section, no distinction is necessary between the EPRDF as the party and the state since in practice the two are different sides of the same coin.

In the brief background of the EPRDF, I set forth the EPRDF as the coalition of four ethnic-based parties that represent three-quarters of the population. The remaining quarter were also co-opted as an ally via ethnic-based parties that also lack, like members of the coalition, legitimacy from their own constituency. In the formation of the EPRDF, TPLF’s motivation was strategic, to mobilize the other nations and nationalities in the newly restructured Ethiopia in line with its ethno-linguistic based politics. I also highlighted the fact that the coalition is not egalitarian, but rather TPLF remains the core of the EPRDF and the junior-senior relationship persists. I also pointed out that the Ethio-Eritrean war made the chairpersons of the EPRDF and TPLF more powerful and opened things up to a democratic election. The democratic election door, however, closed very soon following the 2005 election that threatened the power grip of the EPRDF, thereby reducing the political space. The overall implication is that TPLF’s views about religion in general and Islam in particular were brought forward to the EPRDF.

5.3 EPRDF’s Overarching Narrative: Ethnicity

In the previous sections, I pointed out that the political program of the EPRDF is ethno-linguistic-based. In the following section, I explain in detail the narrative that legitimizes this very political program. The narrative of EPRDF clearly exhibits the process of othering, distancing and stigmatizing those who do not fit to the collective memory it seeks to construct. Owing to the fact that Ethiopia is one of the oldest surviving polities in Africa, the narrative of the EPRDF stretches far back into the past. Thus, I look into how the EPRDF’s narrative of the past links to the present and the envisioned ideal (5.3.1). Given that the narrative of the past also emphasizes the glory days of the past and the decay that followed, I look into the economic narrative. In the EPRDF’s narrative, the historic question of marginalization of ethnicities is reversed for the last time; the only journey that remains to be completed is that of an economic renaissance (5.3.2). In order to achieve the renaissance, the EPRDF promotes unity in diversity, which is also dealt with in 5.3.3.

5.3.1 The past, the present, and the ideal

Perhaps totalitarian narratives are the most distinctive feature of the EPRDF. Whatever specific form the narratives might take, they are interwoven with recurring themes. The time frame usually stretches into the nation’s antiquity, creatively combining the past, the present, and the ideal (EPRDF, 2007, pp. 3-48). In the retelling, on the one hand I could observe a rupture and on the other hand continuity. The rupture is evident when one observes that the EPRDF’s narratives of the past
differentiate the present from the past. To the EPRDF, Ethiopia’s past displays historical injustice and inequality among nations, nationalities, and peoples, purportedly reversed in the present “democratic order.” Article 39 of the 1995 constitution uses the terms “nation,” “nationalities,” and “people” interchangeably to designate ethnicities in Ethiopia, which number more than 80.

In the depictions of the EPRDF, the present is qualitatively different from the past since it exhibits radical improvement. The concept of the improvement, however, is not of an incremental nature but rather a rebirth. In the rupture, the past is an antithesis to the present. A document of the Ministry of Federal Affairs puts the two ages in contrast, commenting, “Our people let alone in the age of light even in the age of darkness…” (PRC, 2015, p. 2). In the depiction, the past is an age of darkness while the present is the age of light, quite distinct from each other (EPRDF, 2011a, p. 9). The past and the present are thus two different ages. In the “age of darkness,” those who assumed power are construed to be against the people. The leaders supposedly mischievously employed their subjects for their own ends, merely to prolong their reign in power. In nurturing such collective memories, the EPRDF defends its ethno-linguistic political program as a way forward and presents the previous states’ homogenization policies as causes of the conflicts and ethnicities and religious groups as victims of the homogenization policies.

In framing the past in terms of a conflictual account of the states and the people, the EPRDF has an advantage as a revolutionary party. It posits itself as the voice of the people; it rebelled to make real the wishes of the people. The implications of such narratives are even more profound. In the context of the contest, the EPRDF’s proposals become the ultimate expressions of the wishes of the majority, and it is reasonable to push dissenters into the margin as inauthentic voices. With such narratives, those with any kind of dissent become individuals who have benefited from the previous suppressing regimes or systems. Such a narrative thus provides an ideological rationale to stifle any kind of dissent as illegitimate. What the EPRDF’s narratives are doing is that rather than emphasizing the recentness of their political project in line with Marxist-Leninist revolutionary ideals, they are reinscribing the political present into the marginalized ethnicities of Ethiopia, thereby claiming continuity from the pre-Menelik II era when nations and nationalities had their own autonomies.

Notwithstanding the antithetical formulation of the past with the present, the EPRDF’s narrative also presents some level of continuity between the past and the future. The continuity is two-fold, with the present relating to the past and to the future. Of the two, the continuity narrative of the present in relation to the future predominates. In this depiction, the present is a transitory vehicle into the future, which is the ideal. The connecting dots between the two are the present actions of the EPRDF. In the second sense, and less frequently, there is also some level of continuity between the present and the past. Here, however, the connecting lines are not the actions of the previous states but
the impoverished wishes of nations and nationalities. In the continuity narrative of the present with the past, the EPRDF is the realization of the previously impoverished wishes of the people. In the narrative, the present connotes the realization of the wishes of the people or a secured hope, which continues to unfold and becomes self-evident as long as the developmental state programs of the EPRDF are in effect.

The retelling by the EPRDF of the past and its relation to the present has profound implications. It not only defines one’s own self-concept but also the image of others. The narrative serves in the process of “othering.” The EPRDF sees itself as the only legitimate voice of nations and nationalities. It considers opposition parties either as the residuals of the previous unjust and unequal political systems or as those who intend to install a new kind of inequality and injustice. Since the future is essentially the next step of the present undertakings, the present undertaking molds the future into the ideal. The implication of the EPRDF narrative is straight; no detour is needed from the present actions. Moreover, due to the causal linkage of present actions and the envisioned ideal, one should not expect a significant change in terms of policy direction. The map is all set, and what remains is just to follow wholeheartedly the leadership of the EPRDF.

As one could presume, the EPRDF’s narratives are not without contest. Many contend that such a representation is fundamentally flawed. It does not do justice to either Ethiopian history or the present reality. In the opposing narratives, the past that the EPRDF stretches back to the Aksumite kingdom fails to capture adequately the historical reality. To its critics, the depiction fails to provide a fair share to different periods and emphasizes the conflictual aspect of Ethiopian history. Critics also point out that the emphasis on the late 19th century and early 20th century imperial conquests of the past either ignore or belittle the earlier consensual relationship. To the critics, then, such a selection is not congruent with the availability of reliable historical sources. It is rather present concerns that colored the selection to justify the ethnic-based quest of the TPLF-led EPRDF.

5.3.2 Ethnic marginalization and economic narrative

The two concerns that shaped the narratives of the EPRDF are an ethnic marginalization narrative and an economic narrative that the EPRDF seeks to bring to the center of its politics. The EPRDF construes itself as a true guardian of the 1974 revolution, and it discredits the military Derg that assumed power following the revolution. Reasoning from the fact that ethnic-based guerrilla fighters continued their struggle despite the fall of the last monarchical state, the EPRDF frames the Derg as the usurper of the voices of nations and nationalities that used the prevailing power vacuum. In the EPRDF’s perspective, the Derg failed to answer the questions of nations and nationalities and the question of the land adequately. In this narrative, the EPRDF that took power in 1991 answered these two overdue questions through an ethno-linguistic-based federal structure and the stipulation
that the land belongs to the state. In construing itself as true interpreters of the needs of the people, the EPRDF connects itself with the pre-1974 periods.

The narrative dots that connected the EPRDF to the pre-1974 revolutionary struggles are subservient to the present needs, more specifically the needs of the EPRDF to legitimize its rule as the true voice of nations and nationalities. Critics continue to point that the narrative is simplistic and it does not adequately capture the complexities of Ethiopian history. To them, the selection of history is very random and mainly guided by a need to advance its ethnic-based federalism. Some of the EPRDF’s criticisms of the past regimes and praises of the present display a greater deal of anachronism, judging the present with the past and the past with the present. Of course, the latter notion provides the advantage to the EPRDF, while the earlier is unjust to the former states.

The bending of the past to one’s own making, however, is not that easy. The existence of others written sources and religious institutions that had symbiotic relationships with the previous states, however, make rewritings of history difficult to sell not easily sold. The EOTC effectively resisted both inventions and revisions. As a result, in relation to Ethiopian history, almost everything has become a contested point. Among the opposition, the ethnic marginalization narrative runs against the unity of Ethiopia and it is seen as a time bomb waiting to explode. Although the EPRDF claims to pursue a strategy of unity in diversity, many are of the opinion that the centrality of ethnicity in its primordial sense is antithetical to the unity espoused.

The divergence of opinion between the EPRDF and its critics has its own implications. Among those who construe the Ethiopian past as heroic, the image of the EPRDF has become a foe to the unity of Ethiopia. In the EPRDF’s portrayal, whoever speaks nostalgically about the past is an object of suspicion. Sustaining the ethnic marginalization narrative of the EPRDF requires holding voices of opposition guilty of the estrangement of nations and nationalities from the political life of the nation. The new inclusion emphasizes the framing of the Amhara ruling class as a source of the past injustices. The unfortunate consequence of harboring such a narrative in a way has become exclusion. In a nation where group identity is more meaningful than individual identity, many do not see the distinction between the Amhara as a ruling class and the Amhara as an ethnic group.

The EPRDF also adds an economic narrative to the political quest, namely that the nation has failed to achieve economic progress since the 15th century. In this depiction, with the exception of the distant past, where the Aksumite was one of the leading powers, the present is always extolled. In this line, a training document that was prepared states (EPRDF, 2014b, p. 13):

*The identity of our nation Ethiopia...which started from a magnificent civilization, over time weakened and reached the state of a needy nation. Recently, the nation started its recovery*
journey. The journey of its many thousands of years clearly indicates this (My own translation from the original Amharic).

In the opinions of the people, there is also overwhelming doubt and uncertainty towards various economic indexes published by the EPRDF and other international financial agencies. Besides the infrastructure developments, on which almost everyone agrees, continually rising inflation, the unemployment rate of the youth, and the imbalance in economic development have created a sense of despair. The economic narrative that adds a little to the people’s daily life in the face of mounting inflation nurtures nostalgia about the past. There is not also much consensus about the fruitfulness of the present direction towards attaining the ideal. For critics, the developmental state model of the EPRDF that follows the Chinese economic model is a means of securing the absolute control of the party rather than bringing true economic progress and the strengthening of democratic institutions.

The recognition of the earlier glory days of the Aksumite kingdom also makes the present journey essentially one of a renaissance, especially an economic one. The renaissance narrative, however, shies away from the religious narratives that dominate the past. In a way, the economic narrative is a mixture of the long-held scholarly image of Ethiopia, one of a decline from an outpost of Semitic civilization into an underdeveloped country that the EPRDF seeks to reverse. Such a combination, however, is criticized as a Eurocentric interpretation of history, where history is evaluated against economic development and every other thing is regarded as secondary or unimportant (Messay, 2006, p. 816). The successive narratives of the EPRDF are intolerant of persistent dissent and critique. The narratives demand no less than complete acceptance, to the extent that holding them has become perceived as a sign of ingenuity or ignorance.

The way the narratives are framed has at least excluded or at worst targeted certain people groups and institutions. It is no wonder that the EPRDF’s version of the past has faced resistance especially from EOTC adherents and the Amhara population, who have a sense of pride in their past. Non-Amhara, Muslims, and evangelical Christians, however, mostly welcome the narratives of freedom. Such a retelling has also created a reaction of nostalgia for the past and discontent with the present. The Ethiopian reality still awaits the recognition of complexity.

The magnification of the present is two-fold. The EPRDF’s present is “right” both in the sense of the proper direction into the future and in terms of taking the appropriate steps, whose fruits are becoming evident. The EPRDF, with the exception of minor setbacks, idealizes its performance as actions that take into account the unique context of the nation, which other Africans could imitate. Within this narrative, any proposed alternative is a detractor. Any discussions and dissent from the narrative of the EPRDF are equated with an intent to subvert the constitution. After all, there cannot
be many paths besides the already identified path. Any other feasible alternative, therefore, is merely an impetus for delusion.

The shortcoming of such a perspective is obvious. The depiction is such a totalitarian narrative that anything, even the slightest deviation, is considered as an assault against the will of the people, the constitution being its embodiment. It also results in the refusal of any other yardstick and independent evaluations. The EPRDF is very busy refuting alternate narratives and framing them with the intent of disestablishing the nation. Any critiques, even empirical ones, are considered as ideological warfare, and the response they invoke is endless rhetoric that does not have room for the re-examination of the EPRDF’s own stand on the matter. The EPRDF’s adage has continued to be የጋመሎና ያህዳሉ፣ውሾቹም ያጮ Halifax (The camels move and the dogs bark), ignoring alternate voices as detractors.

It is no wonder that in all the charges of the state, even against journalists, the intent of subverting the constitution has become a catch phrase that has dominated the official discourse and the state media. Whatever the form of dissent, the EPRDF views it as a conspiracy that curtails the inevitable transformation championed by the EPRDF. The way that oppositions are framed and responded could indicate the fragility of the system built, implicitly conveying a message that for it to stand it should not be touched. Thus, endless rhetoric becomes a defense that characterizes the EPRDF. According to the EPRDF, the ideological war is more important. Without winning the ideological war, unifying humans and other resources to eradicate authoritarianism and poverty is impossible. Once the ideological war is over, however, there remains the unfinished struggle against poverty and backwardness, which is the ultimate enemy to be defeated through revolutionary democracy. The imageries of the EPRDF, like many other socialist and communist parties, employ revolutionary language like “war” and “the army.”

Despite the EPRDF’s rejection of many kinds of dissent, it accepts some. The acceptability of the dissent hinges on the types of dissent. If it is about legal frameworks and policy directions, the EPRDF does not welcome it. If it is about administrative problems, referred to as good governance problems, the EPRDF somehow shows a relatively higher level of openness. In the EPRDF’s opinion, the governance problems get better as the culture of democracy, accountability, and transparency mature. The recognition of the latter kind of deficiency emanates from a perception that they are defensible on the ground of the rent-seeking mentality of a few or as unsettled residuals of the neoliberals that have to be corrected in due time. The EPRDF also realizes the fact that the people’s experiences with the state’s administrative machinery are quite different from the political rhetoric. The recognition of the problems is thus a way of managing the cognitive dissonance that emanates from diverging experiences of the people from the official rhetoric. As with most collective memories, the narratives fail to recognize the complexities and the need for dialogue. The EPRDF’s
narrative brands itself as a truth that everyone should buy. Such a disposition to the past creates discontent even if it operates in stealth.

5.3.3 Unity in diversity

The other most important theme of the EPRDF narrative is inextricably intertwined with the nation’s diversity (EPRDF, 2014a, pp. 6-12). The EPRDF depicts Ethiopia as a nation that harbored diversity from its antiquity. It laments, however, that the ruling elites of the past had a wrong conception of diversity, a negative perception that treated it as a threat to national unity. The past is thus generally problematized as an utter failure to recognize the multiplicity of identity, be it in ethnicity, language, or religion. It is a mistaken view that recognition of diversity will undermine and threaten national unity. In this line, the EPRDF states that “The third face of our national history is its failure to accommodate properly the diversity of nationalities and religions that formed it” (EPRDF, 2014a, p. 2).

The EPRDF’s strong critique begins from the late 19th century efforts of Menelik II that formed the present boundary of Ethiopia. The expansion of Menelik II and its centralizing policy are the culprits for the subjugation of nations and nationalities in Ethiopia other than the Amhara. Menelik’s and his successor Haile Selassie’s assimilation strategies are judged as ill-conceived and utter failures. The framing of the past events is also within the selfish ambitions of its leaders, in a way that the overall intention was to maintain one culture at the core and all the others at the periphery. In this evaluation, the EPRDF neglects to give credit for the unity achieved on the basis that the unitary Ethiopia vision was an imposition rather than a contract entered into at will. The past is thus seen as a pile of historical injustice and inequality that covered the beauty of nations and nationalities.

The implication of such a narrative is profound. It requires rewriting the past. The imprisonment narrative of nations and nationalities before 1991 remained as a dominant schematic template under which everything else falls. The invitation for discussion is more to embellish the already formulated structure without the real possibility of reformulation. In reality, however, such a freedom is beyond reach. Even if the depictions demonize the past efforts as robbing one’s ethnic identity, a fully-fledged self-determination right is still beyond reach. A multi-ethnic recognition of nations and nationalities is, of course, commendable. From this, however, it should not follow that some nationalities have to be viewed with suspicion as if they are always destined by their very nature to advance only a nefarious agenda. Even if it takes time and effort, conscious exercises that envision and pursue trust are necessary.

Ethnic identities developed without maintaining a sufficient interface are thus increasingly becoming a source of prejudice rather than resilience. Besides the celebration of diversities, one also could note that the weight given to all diversity is not equal. In fact, within the new order, the
conception of diversity is through an ethnic identity lens. Any other ways of organization, thus, are essentially discouraged. The diversity narrative is thus rigidly marked, clearly favoring a primordial structuring of life. In a way, it ignores that identity is also a social construct. On pragmatic grounds too, the ethnic federation structure has not yet become a political reality. In practice, it accomplished quite little besides building a sense of pride in one’s own culture and language. The policies have not yet sufficiently translated into practices that empower the devolution. Still, much of the authority is under central state control and the practices have disempowered regions. A closer look at the diversity narrative also provides an interesting insight. The recognitions of other group identities, such as religious, were marginal in value. This in no way derives from rightly conceiving the nature of the society, as religion has always been an important identity mark.

The secondary status of religion hinges on the perception that ethnicity is primordial and religion is constructed. Thus, in the EPRDF’s conception, diverse people have diverse religions. The conception has been that ethnic identity is an essential property of being an Ethiopian, while religious identity is an accidental property. Religious identity thus cannot be a primary way of identifying oneself, but rather it is subsumed under ethnic identity as its expression. The apex of such a conception is embodied in the constitution, where an ultimate power falls under nations and nationalities. Such a perspective essentially targets others who refuse to make ethnicity the very center of their life. Various reform movements that espouse universality and refuse to identify with ethnicities are thus contradicting this very vision and considered as enemies, since their effort will be in direct opposition to the constitutional provisions.

Another important feature of the retelling is that of a sharp distinction between rulers and their subjects. In such a distinction, the account of evil goes to those in power, not to the people. On the contrary, the people were virtuous and resisted the unjustness they received. Hailemichael (2013, p. 11), a prominent official within the EPRDF, succinctly describes the distinction as an age where “the people and the state were pursuing divergent directions, thereby leading the nation in backwardness.” Such a narrative praises the entire people as insightful that were dragged behind. Even if one cannot deny some among the people could be insightful, ascribing such a phrase to the whole population and denouncing its leaders seems more of a political maneuver than an apt description of reality. If such a conception is pursued with conviction, it is also not without consequence. In fact, the conception greatly reduces the role a state should play in steering policy direction that at times could be contrary to popular perceptions.

In the above overarching narrative sub-sections, I explained the fact that the political program of the EPRDF puts ethnicity at its very center. The EPRDF depicts the past as one of ethnic marginalization that it has reversed in the present and is taking the people into the ideal future. The marginalization narratives, however, are careful to differentiate the people from its rulers, and the
EPRDF demonizes the latter while extolling the virtues of the former. I also looked into the narrative of the EPRDF that emphasizes the glory days of the past and the decay that followed. In its depiction, with the recognition of ethnic equality, the nation is progressing forward towards achieving prosperity; the only journey remaining is to be completed with the leadership of the EPRDF. The EPRDF also advances the thesis of unity in diversity as the only way forward that guarantees that the historic injustices could not be repeated. The centrality of the ethnic narrative in EPRDF politics leaves religious-related identity questions with secondary importance and rejects religious-related causes for political mobilization.

5.4 EPRDF’s depiction of Ethiopia’s religious past

Under the EPRDF’s depiction of Ethiopia’s religious past sections, I set forth that the EPRDF’s narrative also includes the religious marginalization narrative, albeit in a secondary role (5.4.1). What I attempt to explain in this section is that for the EPRDF the religious marginalization is primarily motivated by economic interest, and in varying degrees and varying ways all religions were subjected to the previous states’ ill-informed policies. Since the EPRDF’s religious marginalization narrative invokes the previous constitutions, I also look into the rhetoric of the EPRDF that extols its own constitution and belittles the previous ones (5.4.2). Given that it is in Haile Selassie’s regime that the constitutions were formulated and the EOTC earned the official status of the state church, I look briefly at the constitutional provisions (5.4.3). In the final section (5.4.4), I show the ambivalence of the EPRDF to label the EOTC as the primary beneficiary of the monarchical states. In each of the above cases, I look also at the concerns of the Muslim activists.

5.4.1 Marginalization

The EPRDF’s portrayal of Ethiopia’s religious history is not that different from its own overarching ethnic narrative. The religious marginalization narrative does not dismiss the past altogether; rather, it appropriates it for its own goal. It begins by acknowledging the diversity of the religious landscape from antiquity. The EPRDF resonates with laments about the marginalization of Muslims in the nation’s politics. In this depiction, the previous Ethiopian states failed to recognize the religious diversity beyond its instrumental value. The recollection of the past serves two interrelated goals, extolling the religious adherents’ greatness and nurturing a sense of gratitude towards the EPRDF as a party that made right past wrongs.

In the EPRDF’s depictions, all religions in Ethiopia espouse both religious freedom and equality. It is quite worth noting that the EPRDF’s stance towards its own citizens is to refrain from criticizing the masses. The goal of greatness for the society is evident when we look at how the EPRDF’s historical image of the people extols and exalts the virtues of the religions and their
adherents in relation to religious freedom and equality. The narrative cherishes the adherents in contradistinction to the past states, who were selfishly pursuing the consolidation of their own power against the wishes of the people. The EPRDF’s narrative (2011b, p. 3) states, “As states were fighting for their own agenda, our people passed religious respect and tolerance from generation to generation and made the nation under one roof where all religions worship.”

The extolling of the people’s virtues despite historical oppression had a political end. In doing so, not only are all the positive cultural elements among the religious adherents effectively divorced from the previous states, but also the previous states become scapegoats for all the negative elements of both Ethiopian history and culture. The problem with such an approach is that it robs the opportunity of the religious to engage in critical self-reflection and actively seek reconciliation by taking responsibility for historic atrocities. It is no wonder that critical religious self-reflection about one’s religious history is generally missing from the culture of the Ethiopian religious sector.

In a similar fashion to the EPRDF’s overarching narratives of ethnic marginalization, the religious marginalization narrative divides the nation into three distinct ages, namely the age of the monarchs, the age of military state, and the age of the new Ethiopia. The past, both the age of the monarchy and the age of the military state, is set as an antithesis to the present. The characterization of the earlier period is that of marginalization and the present as an age of equality and freedom. For the EPRDF, the period of the monarchy is the age of the emperors and the sultanates. Notwithstanding the recognition of Muslim sultanates, the sultanates do not have a prominent role in the EPRDF’s narrative besides passing remarks. The inclusion, however, indicates an increased openness to defining the nation beyond the aged view of the center and Christian culture.

The negative image of the previous states indiscriminately extends to both the Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates. Unlike the Muslim activists’ narrative, which sets the Christian kingdom as the oppressor and the Muslims sultanates as the oppressed, the EPRDF views both as oppressors. In the EPRDF narrative, the Christian kingdoms and the Muslim sultanates pursued a policy of assimilation, or the conformity of others to their own image. Muslim sultanates were also similarly accused of desiring the establishment of a Muslim Ethiopia and the Christian kings a Christian Ethiopia. Thus, in terms of religious policy, in the state’s narrative both the Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates were no different. In relation to the states, thus, the nation has to begin afresh.

The discrediting of the imperial regimes and the socialist state in sustaining the nation’s diversity needs another object to which the EPRDF could link itself. The reality of the religious diversity and accommodative societal culture obstructs the EPRDF from claiming originality in relation to religious tolerance. As a result, the EPRDF presents itself as a party that recognized and provided a constitutional guarantee to sustain the culture that had already been built. In the narration,
however, the diversity of the religious landscape has nothing to do with the previous Ethiopian states but rather with the people. Thus, the EPRDF aligns with the values of its people and distances itself from the past states. The following statement gives a succinct summary of the EPRDF’s perspective of Ethiopia’s past (2013, p. 11):

*Accommodation of any diversity at all was considered as a threat to Ethiopia. As a result, the states attempted to create a nation that has one identity and one religion. When that failed, they even relentlessly attempted to build a nation with no religion and identity* (My own translation from the original Amharic).

The characterization of the Christian kingdom and Muslim sultanates is not without contest. The EPRDF’s depiction that the Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates were not religiously accommodative but rather envisioned “the other” as secondary became a contested point. For EOTC adherents, with the exception of a few politically motivated incidents, the policies of monarchs were not a policy of one nation, one language, and one religion, as the EPRDF claims. For them, the Christian kings were tolerant and accommodating, while the Muslim sultanates were intolerant and violent. For Muslim activists, however, clearly there was such a policy. The symbiotic relationship of the EOTC with the monarchical state makes the distinction the EPRDF difficult.

In the collective memories of Muslim activists, the Council of Boru Meda decree by Yohannes IV (1837-1889), which demanded Muslims to convert or leave the country, was not a watershed moment in otherwise cordial relationships. It was rather an explicit reminder of the historic subjugation of the Muslim communities. In the activists’ narrative of the Ethiopian history, Muslims felt a sense of foreboding, while Christians were treated as first class citizens. Ethiopian Christians point out that the Muslim sultanates were destructive, as is evident in Ahmed Gragn, if not restrained by power. In the collective memory of Ethiopian Christians, Ahmed Gragn remains as a sign of Islamic extremism that is intolerant to Christians and Christianity. To Muslim activists, however, Ahmed Gragn is primarily an Islamic hero who fought to end the marginalization of Islam and Muslims from the national life. Ustaz Abubakar Ahmed (2012), the chairperson of the dissidents committee, remarks in this line about Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi:

...*Imam Ahmed, Ahmed al-Ghazi or some call him Gragn (the left-handed). Those who call him Gragn are the confused ones. In Ethiopian history, he did great things. He marched to unify the territory as one nation. Some accuse him in the process of doing so, saying, “Imam Ahmed destroyed churches and the nation.” If that were true, Imam Ahmed would have destroyed the centers of Christianity, Aksum and Lalibela. Imam Ahmed, however, did not*
destroy them. Islam is not a din (religion) that has come to destroy. He marched with taqwa (an attitude of piety, reverence, and judgment in Islam). His purpose was to deliver tawhid and justice to humanity (My own translation from the original Amharic).

The position of the EPRDF in relation to Gragn rests in the middle. It recognizes him as Ethiopian but as a destructive force who used the prevailing religious inequality for political gain. The narrative also recognizes the destructive nature of the conquest. Ethiopian Muslim activists also share the same line of reasoning towards the imperial regimes. The difference is that the object of marginalization is not mainly an ethnic identity but a religious one. The divergence of the state narrative with that of the Muslim activists derives from differing concerns. The EPRDF’s narrative does not permit the prominence of religious identity over ethnic identity as a source of mobilization. For Muslim activists that envision strong and vibrant Muslim communities, however, the centrality of ethnic identity causes fragmentation.

Muslim activists do not find the EPRDF’s public memory sufficient to mobilize the Muslim communities to assert a defining role in the present Ethiopia, so there is some level of a contest with the state imposed collective memory. As Rashid Khalidi, quoted in Litvak (2009b, p. 20), points out, the objective of invoking the narrative is to make a difference. He states, “To make a difference in society, it is not enough for a certain past to be selected; it must be capable of arousing emotions, motivating people to act, and being received favorably by the majority.” Ahmedin writes in a popular magazine (Ahmedin, 2010, p. 17):

The emperors took various measures openly and in disguise to weaken Muslims. Probably, with the exception of Fasilides of Gonder, all emperors did the same. Despite remnants of continuous advocacy to paint the imperial regimes as nationally benevolent and heroic figures, in all opportunities we should not refrain to talk and write about the anguish and adversity they caused. Receiving them as heroes is considered as participating against the mockery of the oppressed, delighting with the scar left, not closing the possibility of similar future actions, and risking the lasting spirit of forgiveness and democracy (My own translation from the original Amharic).

The EPRDF’s political myths in retrospect creatively engraved into its revolutionary ideals the issue of religious freedom and equality. The EPRDF presents itself as a liberator who straightened out the deprived religious freedom and equality. It reads into its history religious freedom and equality as a cause it struggled to ensure. In fact, such a reading is a creative employment of the past. Indeed, religious freedom and equality surfaced in the revolutionary movement of the early 1970s
and were part of the push factors that triggered the Eritrean secessionist revolutionary movements. The attribution of this to the revolutionary struggle of the EPRDF or TPLF, however, is clearly an invention.

Religious issues never had primacy in the revolutionary struggles of the TPLF-dominated EPRDF. As the pre-1991 stance of TPLF shows in Chapter Five, TPLF avoided religion and religiosity from the midst of its political discourses unless it had some expediency for achieving certain political goals where religion provided the pragmatic mechanism. Moreover, the transitional charter of Ethiopia issued on July 22, 1991 did not explicitly issue any article related to religious freedom and equality. The overlooking of religious rights should not be taken lightly since the document was evidently a roadmap that embraced the EPRDF’s revolutionary ideals. The same proclamation’s Article 2, however, extensively stated the rights of nations and nationalities that the EPRDF consistently championed right from its formation (PDTCE, 1991). The omission of religious rights from the transitional charters thus strengthens the argument that religious freedom and equality was not a political ideal the EPRDF championed in its revolutionary struggles.

The reinvigoration of religiosity, as refugees from the uncertain future of the nation, however, became undeniable reality when the EPRDF took power in 1991. The suppressed religiosity came to the surface from the shadows, and public expression of religion became the order of the day. All sorts of religions returned to the religious landscape and most of them with a fundamentalist flavor. With its pragmatism, the EPRDF championed religious freedom and equality as well as the questions of nations and nationalities. The EPRDF’s pragmatism, however, was careful to ensure that the primary identification mark of groups’ politics was ethnic-based identity. The EPRDF’s attitude towards organizations that were trans-ethnic, whether national or global in orientation, was that of suspicion.

As mentioned earlier in Chapter Five, in its formative periods the EPRDF conceived religious organizations as effective propaganda tools to disseminate its revolutionary democratic ideals. The EPRDF in practice thus not only accepted religious freedom and equality but also recognized a religious party in its interim state council. The Islamic Liberation Front of Oromia (IFLO) was not a trans-ethnic religious political party but rather an ethnic-based religious party. As a result, it was not a problem for the EPRDF. Once the EPRDF consolidated its power through the national election and the constitution, it banned religious involvement in politics. Its pre-1991 stance towards the EOTC, as a force that has a strong imprint, remained negative, as seen in the way it dealt with the pro-Derg patriarch, pressuring him to leave the country.
5.4.2 EPRDF’s constitutional rhetoric: Secularism

At the very core of the EPRDF’s narrative positing itself as the champion of religious freedom and equality lies the 1995 constitutional rhetoric. The constitutional discourse of the EPRDF compares its own with that of its predecessors. Before the 1995 constitution, the nation had three constitutions, namely those of 1931, 1955, and 1987. In the following section, I will explore the EPRDF’s constitutional rhetoric. More specifically, the intent is to look into the provisions of these constitutions in relation to religious freedom and equality from the perspectives of the EPRDF’s narrative and Muslim activists. A training manual of the EPRDF, for example, states (EPRDF, 2011b, p. 2):

*The constitutionalization of the state and citizens’ relationship dates back to 1923, during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie. This constitution clearly counted the land and the people as the property of the emperor. It made the citizens strangers. It chained their mind and body, thereby forcing our nation to pass through the age of darkness. The 1923 constitution and its revised version in 1948 crushed the identity of nations and nationalities. It also suppressed religious freedom by proclaiming a state religion. The 1980s constitution of the Derg conceived religion as an imperialistic, backward, and anti-revolutionary force. The perception that the weakening of the religious institutions strengthens the socialist order caused the regime to close off religions and persecute their followers*13 (My own translation from the original Amharic).

The above-mentioned statement summarizes the EPRDF’s constitutional discourse in relation to religious freedom and equality. The approach compares the predecessor’s stance to its own in order to establish the supremacy of the latter. For the EPRDF, in light of religious freedom and equality, both the imperial and the socialist constitutions failed. The failure of the Haile Selassie state was to declare a state religion while its citizens were religiously diverse. The Derg also failed by pursuing an ideologically motivated anti-religious stance. The criticisms of the two constitutions also differ in one respect. The EPRDF’s criticism of the 1931 and the 1955 constitutions always begins from the centrality of ethnic identity, which is absent in the criticism of the Derg. The EPRDF discredits the centralization effort of the Haile Selassie regime, which attempted to bring about cultural assimilation, as hegemony that promoted the Amhara ethnicity and crushed the rest. The narrative also frequently employs enslavement metaphors, noting the consideration of the subjects as properties of the king endowed with no right of their own.

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13 The years are as stated in the original documents and are based on Ethiopian calendars. In the Gregorian calendar 1923 becomes 1931 and 1948 becomes 1955.
Clearly, the 1931 constitution’s overall intent was establishing a hereditary absolutist monarchy. The constitution’s clauses were designed to serve as the guardians of a strong monarchical state, perpetuating the emperor and his progeny to remain the only rightful heirs to the throne. The constitution was not at all a means by which the state established popular sovereignty or democratic ideals. This is clear when one notes that the constitution includes a statement that says, “the person of the Emperor is sacred, his dignity inviolable, and his power indisputable.” The Senate and the Chamber of Deputies appointments were also not through popular election but rather handpicked by the emperor. Despite the fact that the constitution is deeply flawed in terms of popular sovereignty ideals, however, the classification of the constitutional provisions as enslavement is hard to sustain. A review of the constitution indicates the right of free movement (Article 22), freedom from sentence or imprisonment except in pursuance of the law (Article 23), the right not to be deprived of a trial in a legally established court (Article 24), the right of private correspondence (Articles 25 and 26), and the right of possession (Article 27).

In relation to religious equality and freedom, however, the constitution is silent. It also did not establish the EOTC as the national church (Perham, 1948, pp. 407-416). Given that the Ras Täfäri, upon becoming prince regent, somehow craftily orchestrated the excommunication of Lij Iyyásu, the failure to establish the EOTC as a state church is intriguing. The excommunication states, “From this day (September 28, 1916) forth, oh chiefs, you are freed from your oath to the apostate Lij Iyyásu” (Hiwet, 1975, p. 60). The apostasy charge, among others, includes that he adopted Islam as his religion. Among Muslim activists, Lij Iyyásu’s commemoration is as that of “the marginalized Muslim king.” The Fidake Islamic Dawa blog (2016) states, “King Iyyásu the IV or Abeto Iyyásu is one of the traditions that those anti-Islam historians wanted to hide.”

The great omission of religious diversity seems intentional. John Markakis (1974, p. 337) notes the omission of diversity of any kind, including religion, with the intent of creating a unified Ethiopia. He states that the constitutional provisions “conscientiously avoided any reference to ethnic linguistic or religious diversity and eschewed mentioning such matters in official documents.” The unitary vision of Ethiopia is evident in the provisions.

There are, however, statements that indirectly confer a special right to the EOTC. These are derivatives from the emperor. Because the faith of the emperor was Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and his legitimacy lay upon the religious claim of the EOTC, the historical symbiotic relationship continued. Articles 2, 3, and 4 rationalize the legitimacy of the king on two grounds, namely his blood tie to the legendary Queen Sheba and the anointing the emperor received upon his coronation. The story of Queen Sheba traces the lineage of the emperor to King Solomon of Judea and thereby affirms the EOTC as the custodian of the Ark of the Covenant. The anointing of the king also clearly indicates that the state looks to the EOTC to legitimize his rule.
Unlike its earlier version, the 1955-revised constitution had explicit provisions related to the EOTC. The constitution vests power in the EOTC to conduct the coronation ceremony of emperors (Article 7). It also demands the crown prince and the king to profess and defend Orthodox Christianity (Article 21, 23 and 126). Members of the royal family should also profess Orthodox Christianity (Article 16), and there are provisions postulating that failure to profess Orthodox Christianity has serious consequences. Upon conversion to another religion, one loses their membership in the royal family and thus forgoes the possibility of becoming king (Article 16 and 126). The revised constitution also bestowed the status of the state church upon the EOTC with privileges, including the right to get support from the state.

The change in the status of the EOTC in the revised constitution requires assessment, and one should not hastily conclude that the power of the church increased in the revised constitution. The new clauses should not give the impression that the emperor subsumed his power under the EOTC. In fact, what happened is likely the opposite. With the new provisions, Haile Selassie’s influence extended to the religious sphere of the EOTC. His legitimate rights now encompassed issuance of decrees related to the church, with the exception of monastic and spiritual administration (Article 126). The constitution also bestowed upon him the right to approve the spiritual consecration of the clergy (Article 127). In a way, the articles not only provided a special status to the EOTC but also effectively brought the church under its control (Ethiopia, 1991). The tightening of the control of the church in the revised constitution makes sense when we look into the historical context that prompted it.

The overall context of the proclamation was the consolidation of strict control of the emperor in relation to new developments within the church through the leadership of the regent Täfäri Mekonen (the name of the emperor before he came to power). Before the 1920s, all bishops of the Ethiopian church were Coptic, and they played a decisive role in the spiritual administration of the church. The church was at the service of the state’s ideology by promoting the image that Ethiopia is a Christian nation and the legitimate rulers are the elect of God after the line of King David of Israel. The centralization effort of Haile Selassie thus envisioned the church as an already established contrivance that communicated and promoted the decisions of the state. This new proposal, however, clearly put at stake the independence of the church in purely ecclesiastical affairs. It is no wonder that the church resisted the new move of the state. Therefore, the 1931 constitution did not establish the EOTC as the state church since the church resisted the renewed vision of the state (Ancel & Ficquet, 2015, pp. 71-72).

In the 1920s and 1930s, the church of Alexandria appointed five Ethiopian bishops. The consecrated bishops were the allies of the regent Täfäri. The years between 1941 and 1959 witnessed a renewed long negotiation to achieve autocephalous status for the Ethiopian church and the
appointment of the indigenous archbishop with the power to consecrate other bishops (Ancel, 2011, p. 168; Ancel & Ficquet, 2015, pp. 71-72). The granting of the appointment of an Ethiopian archbishop in 1951 that had the power to appoint other bishops thus required consolidating the power of the emperor in the church.\footnote{For a review of the protracted negotiation that eventually declared the Ethiopian church independent in 1959, see Wudu (2012).} Before the appointment of Ethiopian bishops, the foreignness of the church authorities effectively made inept the office of the Coptic Church that was attached to the royal court. The effective influence of the church in Ethiopia was thus different from the churches in Europe, which had a strong voice even in matters related to the administration of the state (Wudu, 2012, pp. 141-142). The new constitutional provisions were thus the emperor’s strategy to restrain the leadership of the church, who were now Ethiopians rather than Egyptians. His action towards the church was somehow similar to his treatment of the nobility, legally reducing their status to the loyal appointees of Haile Selassie. By doing so, Haile Selassie was breaking the authority of the church the same way he did that of the nobility. In light of this, the religious freedom right makes much more sense.

The 1955 constitution also recognized some rights in relation to religious freedom. Article 37 of the constitution stated, “No one shall be denied the equal protection of the laws.” Article 40 also protected the right of freedom of worship in relation to the rites of any religion or creed by the residents of the empire unless the religious rites are utilized for political purposes or prejudicial to public order or morality. The constitution, however, did not put any kind of restriction on public offices based on religion (Ethiopia, 1991). Ethiopian Muslim activists do not mention these clauses as advancement. Muslim activists emphasis the constitutional clauses that prohibit the possibility of a Muslim king and that bestow the special status on the EOTC.

In 1987, the Derg also issued a constitution for the People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The preamble of the constitution depicted the Derg as the vanguard leader of the revolution that created favorable conditions for equalities of nationalities, of the sexes, and of religions. Article 46 of the constitution also explicitly recognized rights of religious freedom as fundamental. It had provisions that ensured the guarantee of freedom of conscience and religion, the exercise of freedom of religion, and the separation of religion and the state. The limitation of the exercise of freedom of religion was only when it was contrary to the interest of the state and the revolution, public morality, or the freedom of other citizens. Thus, it improved the equality of religions and freedom of rights. In practice, however, the state had negative views towards all religions.

In the EPRDF narrative, in the military socialist period the negative stance towards all religious establishments was presumed as self-evident and therefore left without much explanation. The portrayal of the Derg is that of anti-religious, with all religions equally suppressed. In the narrative,
the overall attempt of the Derg was to create a society that is without religious heritage. The consequences of such policies were evident in the closing of various religious institutions, confiscation, migration, and torture. During that period, every religion suffered losses. As a state that espoused scientific socialism, the conception of religion was indeed anti-revolutionary, anti-development, and backward. Consistent with the ideals of a socialist portrayal, the weakening of religion seemed necessary so that the revolutionary agenda could thrive. The result was the closing down of various religious establishments, the oppression of the religious, and the exile of prominent religious leaders with the fear of state persecutions. The EPRDF’s narrative, however, overlooks some positive clauses of the 1987 constitution that espoused religious equality and freedom. The overall emphasis was on the pre-1987 state of the Derg regime, in which all religions were counted as undesirable heritages from the past.

The overall nature of the 1995 constitution, thus, is correcting the historical injustices. The EPRDF is proud of the fact that the constitutional resolution is informed by the reality of diversity and its affirmation. At the core of diversity lie ethnic diversity and its many expressions. Based on this principle of making central the nations and nationalities, whose identity is religiously diverse, constitutional clauses were required. The constitutional clauses were thus designed to benefit all religions and have no intent to affect any religion negatively. Guaranteeing the rights of ethnicity obviously required the formulation of religious equality, religious freedom, and the separation of religion from the state. The EPRDF narrative portrays the current period as a period of reversal. It is thus new. It is a new democratic system where religious equality and freedom are respected both in law and in practice.

Without denying the right of association to the religious, religion has become a private matter. Each citizen has the right to pursue his religion as he sees fit without the interference of others, including the state. In the new era or chapter, public institutions such as state, education, and media were made secular. In the EPRDF’s narrative, the strict separation of religion and the state is necessary to uproot the historical religious inequality. Tarekegn (2013, p. 3) describes the EPRDF’s narrative briefly, saying, “In this time our federal constitution has affirmed fully religious freedom and equality… In our present generation, religious freedom, equality and a right for the organization have been well assured…” The new Ethiopia is, therefore, a nation of religious diversity where all religions are equal in the eyes of the law. The guarantee is its constitution. The EPRDF also points to the increasing number of places of worship and the continued recognition of religious holidays as signs of tolerance and coexistence.

The EPRDF’s rhetoric of religious freedom and equality employs constitutional provisions. Underlying the provisions also is the principle of secularism. For the EPRDF, the secularism principle means a neutral stance by the state, equality of all religions, and freedom of all religions.
The principle thus treats all religions equally and respects their freedom. The preamble of the constitution also lays out the convictions of the Ethiopian nations, nationalities, and peoples, one of which is that there should not be discrimination of any sort, including religious. By doing so, the constitution corrects the historically hierarchical relationship between religions and establishes religion as an inviolable human right.

Article 3 of the constitution also speaks of the nature of the Ethiopian flag under the caption of general provisions. This clause declares, “The national emblem on the flag shall reflect the hope of the nations, nationalities, peoples as well as religious communities of Ethiopia to live together in equality and unity.” The EPRDF’s narrative also emphasizes the constitutional provisions of Article 9 that provide final authority to the constitution over and above other laws, cultural practices, and official decisions. The implication of this provision is the recognition of the constitution as having the final say on all matters.

The constitutional clauses directly related to the religious sectors are the separation of religion and state (Article 11), rights related to equality (Article 25), rights related to freedom of belief (Article 27), rights related to the formation of associations (Article 31), rights related to religious courts (Article 34), and the separation of education from religion (Article 90). The implications of these clauses are that religious freedom is provided to all citizens, all religions are made equal, and religion and the state are separate. Constitutionally, according to Article 11, the state and religion are separate.

The state as an administrative system that serves equally all religions should remain neutral. The EPRDF interprets this article as a constitutional guarantee that there will not be a state religion. The state thus cannot establish a state religion in a decree. There will also not be religious state. As a result, state governance cannot be performed through religious ordinances. Any intent to establish a religious state or a state religion is thus a sign of radicalism and extremism. Such an effort is both undemocratic and unconstitutional. The state also does not interfere in religious matters and the religious do not interfere in state affairs. The provision that the state cannot interfere in religious affairs is understood to imply that the state does not have the prerogative to dictate certain kinds of religious doctrines or practices. Likewise, the religious cannot interfere in the state’s political and administrative issues. No religion should marshal finances or its adherents to put pressure on the state’s politics. Article 11 provisions are stated under the fundamental principles of the constitution.

Characteristically, for the EPRDF, religious radicalism and extremism act against three constitutional democratic principles, namely the fact that there will not be a state religion, there will not be a religious state, and the state and religion do not interfere in their respective spheres of influence. Radicalism and extremism also display actions and thoughts that do not recognize the rights of others, consider peaceful coexistence as a threat to one’s identity, reject diversity, and do
not espouse accommodation and tolerance. Such thoughts and actions, if not restrained earlier, will transform into terrorism. Terrorism robs the freedom of citizens to hold any opinion and forces them to change their religion, and if that fails, it advocates mass murdering. Religious conservatism, however, is understood differently than religious radicalism and extremism. Characteristically, it is not against the constitution. It connotes actions and thoughts freely conducted between religious adherents and their leaders. It is due obedience to religious texts and ordinances. It does not impose anything upon other religions. The dividing line between conservatism and religious radicalism is that radicalism intends to determine the fate of other religions without their free consent.

In light of the EPRDF’s interpretation, the litmus test for the violation of state and religion separation is if either of the following two conditions materialize: first, if the state passes a verdict of value judgment towards religions as right and wrong, and second, if the state disposes positively towards one religion. Violation of these two conditions puts at stake the concept of religious freedom. In a similar line, religious interference in the state materializes if the religion starts to judge the policy directions of the state. When the religious sector imposes its religious values, directly or indirectly, upon the state, it ultimately erodes religious freedom.

Article 25 addresses the rights of equality, while Article 27 is about freedom of religion and freedom of expression of thought. Both rights are understood in the constitution as human rights and fall under fundamental rights and freedoms. Thus, unlike the democratic rights, the rights extend even to suspects and criminals. The right of freedom is the right of both individuals and communities. As a result, each citizen is endowed with freedom of religion either individually or in communities with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching. Believers may also establish institutions of religious education and administration in order to propagate and organize their religion. In the attempt of propagation of one’s faith to others, however, no religion can coerce others. Parents and legal guardians also reserve the right to bring up their children in line with their own religious convictions. The conditions that limit freedom of expression of religion are when public safety, peace, health, education, public morality, or the fundamental rights and freedom of others and the independence of the state from religion is in danger.

Article 31 also speaks of freedom of association, and this provision falls under democratic rights. According to this provision, forming associations for any cause and purpose is the right of every person. These organizations, however, cannot be against the promulgated laws or can illegally subvert the constitutional order. Based on this article, the state registers and provides recognition to religious organizations. The EPRDF views the registration process as a means of legalizing and protecting them from anti-constitutional activities. It is also a means of accountability to the religious adherents. The legalization process requires the application of secularist principles in the religious
organizations. The application of secularization in religious associations means the religious association leaders should teach their adherents not to pass negative messages towards the others.

Article 90 also addresses the relationship between education and religion. The article posits that education has to be free from any kind of religious, political, and cultural influences. To the EPRDF, the separation of religion and education is ensuring that students can pursue their education without external pressures. In the EPRDF’s narrative, educational institutions should not be competitive spaces for religious expansion. The perception is that a religiously diverse society requires the educational sector to remain a neutral space governed by secular principles. The provision is also understood as a constitutional clause that protects the religious equality of diverse religious adherences. The EPRDF view is students’ time for education should not be occupied with religious matters. Irrespective of ownership, the educational institutions should be open to all religious adherents.

The EPRDF realizes that there are challenges in relation to the application of the above principles of secularism. The first challenge comes from the history of religion in the previous Ethiopian states. The historic symbiotic relationship between the states and Christianity is not without consequence. It created radicals and extremists that want the hegemony of Christianity to continue in the nation. The EPRDF continually accuses especially some adherents of Orthodox Christianity of nurturing a lament that the previous glory and grace of the church were taken away and should be returned. The narrative also accuses some Muslims of being opportunists that attempt to reverse the historical reality into the establishment of Islam as the state religion or into Ethiopia becoming an Islamic religious state. The latter case is construed as foreign to the Ethiopian Islamic religious culture and an import from the globalized Islamic religious radicalism and extremism.

The second challenge regards the effective application of secularist principles related to state institutions. The EPRDF notes that despite the fact that state institutions are neutral spaces, those who assume positions are mostly religiously devoted individuals. Since secularism does not require officials to be non-religious, the choice to subscribe to any religion is their constitutional right. The EPRDF notes that some officials have dispositions that do not respect the notion of religious equality and treat their own religion with favoritism. In the last few years, the EPRDF has designed mechanisms to curb such malpractice. Through the training it provides, the state encouraged the formation of forums and clubs that promote the values of secularism among public sector leadership. It also attempted to install mechanisms that ensure that public service is based on religious equality and to put in place feedback and measures against the violation of secularist principles. Even if unsuccessful, the state attempted to cleanse its public institutions from symbolic expressions of religion such as iconography and songs.
The third challenge relates to the targeting of educational institutions as missionary fields by the religious. In relation to educational institutions, the EPRDF distinguishes between three things, namely learning from religions, learning religion, and learning about religion. Learning from religion is a principle educational institutions with which should govern themselves. It relates to enriching civics and ethical education curriculum from religious traditions that support the constitutional principle of secularism. The curriculum design has the intent of instilling developmental and democratic values in students at various levels. The EPRDF strictly prohibits learning religion and learning about religions in non-religious institutions. For the EPRDF, learning religion requires a commitment to religious doctrines and it is an effort to make religious adherents into religious scholars. Learning about religion, however, does not necessarily require adherence to a certain religion, but the purpose is to provide knowledge about religions.

The translation of the above perspective of the EPRDF required the issuance of regulations and directives that ensure the application of secularist principles. In the EPRDF’s narrative, it applied the bare minimums in pursuing the secularist principles. The education system permits only learning from religion and prohibits both learning religion and learning about religion. It also prohibits practicing in-group religion within the compound of educational institutions unless on a private basis. It also puts an end the previous customary practices that allow academic and administrative services based on one’s religious background. The directive similarly prohibits the transmission of religious messages and activities within the compound and the use of property for religious purposes. The directive also aims to ensure that there will not be discrimination based on religion, and mechanisms are in place to identify and correct such incidents. The state identified as its fourth challenge the tendency among the religious to construe secularism as anti-religious. The fifth identified challenge relates to the failure to commit to practicing the ideals of secularist principles.

The above challenges to the effective application of secularism also pose dangers. First, the failure to apply it runs against the supremacy of the constitution and creates a disposition to undermine the law. Second, the failure hinders the realization of a secular democratic order, without which equal treatment of the religious is impossible. Thirdly, the failure of application makes state institutions spaces of competition for the religious and thereby the marginalization of the other. Fourth, it could bring terror to fruition. Through nurturing conflicts and creating insurmountable gaps between religious adherents, terrorism secures a strong footing.

In the EPRDF’s perception, thus, the state does not interfere in the spheres of religion. The strict separation of the state and religion as the constitution prescribes is hard to sustain in day-to-day life, given that religious identity is also at the core of its citizens. In day-to-day reality, a number of shared issues blur the strict separation of the religious and the political. A good example is the issue of development. Faith-based organizations provide both spiritual and secular services. The insistence
of the state has been to separate the development wing of the religious. Religious sectors of various traditions also desire participation in the education sector and creatively combine their religious heritages with scientific progress. So far, the only choice left is to separate the secular from the spiritual, and there is not any legally acceptable mechanism by which the religious sector could uphold the holistic approach. State appointees also continue to identify themselves primarily with their religion and exhibit favoritism to their own religions.

In the EPRDF’s narrative, the constitutional provisions of religious freedom and equality are also evident in the way the EPRDF treats the religious. The EPRDF gauges its performance via the prevailing freedom to express religion, worship, and form associations without undue interference from the state and the protection of these rights. The state argues that it indiscriminately provides sufficient and adequate spaces to build places for worships, and burial lands and recognizes religious public holidays. The state also put in place check and balance, the installation of a mechanism that redresses injustices in relation to the enforcement of constitutional provisions. The EPRDF’s own assessment in this regard is impressive (EPRDF, 2006, pp. 36-37):

In our nation, religious equality is maintained both in the law and in practice. As a result, beyond mere gossip and baseless but emotion-triggering accusations, there is not any solid evidence-based criticism that proves the existence of a law that discriminates against religions. There is not any evidence, both in practice and policy administration, that there is injustice. There is no founded accusation where the state and the public sector failed to materialize religious equality (My own translation from the original Amharic).

With such depictions, however, the EPRDF is not denying that there are problems. It recognizes that the actual translations of constitutional provisions have problems. The EPRDF resists any complaint that present failures in religious equality and freedom as the expressions of its order. It considers the failures as that of individuals that could be dealt with the existing legal framework. Individuals could fail to defend the law due to various reasons. Mostly, however, violations are residuals of the past and signs of backwardness that need immediate correction. In the EPRDF’s narratives, problems either are administrative failures or related to poor governance. The correction needed might be from public office bearers and the communities. A document states (EPRDF, 2006, p. 37):

It is a public secret that some governmental officials, civil servants, and members of the public exhibit backward thinking and incline towards religious favoritism (where Christians are the majority to suppress Islam and where Islam is the majority also to suppress other
religions). We have created an environment where these predicaments are not the expressions of the state but rather the problems of individuals (My own translation from the original Amharic).

The recognition of public officials’ favoritism towards their own religion is a step forward. The EPRDF suggests two remedial actions derived from the constitutional mandate and the nation’s culture. First, the EPRDF invokes the constitutional provision that public officials should remember their primary loyalty upon bearing public office and failure to do so will have serious legal consequences. Second, the accommodative religious culture of the nation is also another buffer to protect such abuses. The harboring of these two, the constitutional provisions that treat equally all religions and the accommodative religious culture, corrects practices that lag in the application of religious freedom and equality. There is also a necessity to take legal recourses and administrative actions that immediately correct the sense of institutional injustices among public officials.

5.4.3 Who benefited?

The EPRDF’s characterization of the past in terms of religious marginalization implied that there were both victims as well as beneficiaries of the system. The narrative of religious inequality and freedom entails the naming of those who benefited from the unjust system. The EPRDF’s narratives do not straightforwardly identify the beneficiary but only point to the fact that the EOTC enjoyed preferential status in the revised 1955 constitution. In the depiction of Ethiopia’s religious history, the identity of the religiously marginalized is set straightforwardly as Muslims and Judaism followers. Probably, given that the evangelicals were relatively recent, the marginalization narrative of the EPRDF does not emphasize them. The same is true of Ethiopian Catholics. For some, however, the exclusion of evangelicals is part of the EPRDF’s hidden agenda, the desire to establish a Protestant-dominated Ethiopia. The most plausible explanation is that the involvement of evangelicals in social and political activism is minimal with the exception of the Oromo people group. This is more evident when one looks at the radicalism charge against some evangelicals related to the promotion of narrow ethnic nationalism.

The ambivalence to declare the EOTC as the primary beneficiary of the imperial regimes is unusual, given that the EPRDF has a reputation of labeling. For example, in the line of ethnic marginalization, despite mounting opposition it continued to identify the Amhara as historic oppressors. The ambivalence is likely a political tactic rather than a recognition of complexity and nuance in the history of the EOTC and the monarchs. In political discourse, the EPRDF generally refrains from criticizing the masses or institutions that have wider support in order not to stoke resentment. In the handful of cases where it does, it frames the issue as a question of a handful.
Related to dissent, thus, the term “few” does not really signify number or quantity but rather a public agenda that the EPRDF disapproves. Until the recent religious radicalism discourse, the EPRDF shied away from criticizing the church openly.

In instances of ambivalence, another tactic the regime usually employs is to isolate the leadership from the people and criticize the former. However, the EPRDF noticed that this method is unhelpful in the religious sphere since the society does not make such a distinction between the religious leaders and the religious institutions. The realization that the EPRDF’s criticism of the EOTC’s leadership was easily conflated with the church, thereby creating a perception that the church is under attack, put the brakes on the EPRDF’s conceptual distinctions. Historically, EOTC adherents do not see a rift between the church, the leaders, and its adherents. Very few individuals who attempt to criticize and advance a reform agenda within the church are looked on suspiciously as the other.

In this context, the depiction of Ethiopia’s religious history positions the EOTC as a beneficiary indirectly via listing the special privilege the church enjoyed versus others that did not have similar privileges. A training document states (EPRDF, 2006, p. 36):

Due to their policy of divide and rule, the previous states of our nation have made one religion superior over the other. Thus, the relationships among the people have not been based on the equality of religions. As a result, up to the recent times, religious inequality and injustice have been one of the defining features of our political system. In the age of the monarchs, we reached a level where Christianity has become a legally imposed state religion. The period was a period of state interference in religious affairs, citizenship primacy given based on religious affiliation, and adherents of marginalized religions considered as secondary citizens. While Christian religion controlled one-third of the national land, in some parts of Ethiopia followers of Islam and Judaism did not have the right of burial land possession (My own translation from the original Amharic).

The above description sets the EOTC as a beneficiary but as a passive receiver of benefits like owning one-third of the land. The church is also set as a victim since the installation of the EOTC as a national religion caused state interference in matters of faith. With such a depiction, the marginalization narrative expanded its boundary to include the EOTC. This move is part of the EPRDF’s pragmatism. It also depicts the church as a victim in whose affairs the state interferes. The EPRDF is cognizant that a marginalization narrative that excludes the support base of the majority stokes dissent. If that is the case, then, political opponents could capitalize on the exclusion as a means of mobilization. In this line, another document of the EPRDF states (2013, p. 10):
The main intention of the policy of seeing religious diversity as a threat and the constitutional direction of enforcing the supremacy of one religion was to provide security for order. By promoting a state religion, the state made religious freedom non-existent through the approval of the appointment of religious leaders and using religion as an instrument of security that benefits the rulers (My own translation from the original Amharic).

The rejection of religious diversity and the bestowing of religious supremacy on the EOTC by the monarchs is interpreted as a means of legitimizing one’s rule, not as religious zeal. The narrative also attempts to evaluate the constitutions of 1931 and 1955. The initial constitution is discredited as totalitarian and having not much provision for citizens’ rights. The making of the EOTC into a state religion was thus an orchestrated means through which religious freedom was indirectly taken away, since the same constitution reserves the right to appoint spiritual leaders to the kings. According to the narrative, the hierarchy of the religions is a divide and rule strategy to prolong one’s position.

In order not to create antagonism between various religious adherents, however, in the narrative the nation is equated with people, not with the ruling states. Accordingly, the depiction of the nation became a nation of religious diversity, a nation of Christians, Jews, Muslims, traditional religious believers, and other adherents. The portrayal of the adherents of each religion is also tolerant and accommodative, united in the ethos of building the nation even if in rare cases they have become also a victim of the nefarious propaganda of the state. For example, a document titled “Efforts of building a developmental democratic system and its challenges” says (EPRDF, 2006, p. 35):

In most of the cases, the followers of these diverse faiths have lived with tolerance and concern for others and have built the nation. They have also defended the nation from external foreign aggression (My own translation from the original Amharic).

The historic marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims is also a theme that has strong footing among Ethiopian Muslim activists. In depicting their religious history, the activists begin their own narratives from the seventh century, when Islam was first introduced through the first immigrants of the followers of the prophet Muhammad. That distant past extols the nation and its king, the land of Ahmed al-Najāshī, a land of justice. Their depiction generally follows the religious texts, especially in the Hadith, as a haven for first migration, a freedom from discrimination and liberation.

The activists point out, however, that such a positive treatment of Islam and Muslims ended immediately with the death of the king. In fact, they believe that due to his conversion he also suffered opposition from the religious leader and the royal line. A statement issued on December 23,
2013 from prison by the Ethiopian Muslim Communities’ Arbitration Committee, by extolling this period, laments about the present (Dimitsachin-Yisema, 2013, p. 1):

About 1,400 years ago, Ethiopia had been able to establish a just order far better than the order of the 21st century society established. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) aptly described the then Abyssinian (Ethiopian) king as “a king in whose realm no one is wronged.” The degree of fairness, truthfulness, and civility one must exhibit to establish a just system worthy of such prophetic praise is obvious. The just system that had been in place at that time, in this land of ours, was able to provide a safe haven for those [persecuted early Muslims] who were in dire need of a place of freedom and justice, thus transcending the bounds of time. The tragic situation that we are currently in would compel us to inquire, "Why is our country, which had been the flagship of justice at a time when people had limited awareness, turning a blind eye when the prevailing thrust in the rest of the world is towards democracy and justice?" (My own translation from the original Amharic)

For the Muslim Diaspora representatives, thus, the history of marginalization of Islam and Muslims commenced from the king’s death. The prevailing narrative among Ethiopian Muslims activists is that the rest of Ethiopian history continued to marginalize Muslims, treating them as enemies and foreigners. In the depiction, Muslims had a secondary citizen’s position. Generally, the social and political life of the nation excluded them. An adage frequently quoted among Muslims is ከእስላም ከሎክ (The abode of an eagle is a tree and the abode of a Muslim is Mecca). The perception is that a Muslim’s abode belongs to Saudi Arabia or Mecca. A document submitted to the late prime minister of Ethiopia through the delegates of the Muslim Diaspora states as follows (EMDAC, 2007, p. 2):

What was realized at the end of the Aksumite kingdom reign was neither maintained nor improved. The actions of those states that followed the Aksumite kingdom, especially the Solomonic dynasty (1260-1966), were contrary to the Aksumite kingdom. The military struggles of the Middle Age, from the seventh to the 13th century, against many widespread Islamic systems and sultanates, were a coup d'etat against our honored history. Islam was framed as an enemy. Muslims were viewed as foreigners (My own translation from the original Amharic).

One would wonder, “Why is it the Solomonic dynasty that is singled out?” or “Why is that the Zagwe dynasty is left out?” The exclusion of the Zagwe from the discriminatory history of Ethiopian
kings is because there was peaceful coexistence between the kingdom and the Islamic sultanates. That was not, however, by design but rather by necessity since the dynasty was weak. It hardly controlled its own previous territory; much less could it pursue an expansionist policy. It was also during this reign that Ethiopian forces refused to join the invitation of European crusaders against the Muslim world. Indeed, this was that part of the reason why, when Saladin conquered the holy land, he graciously allotted ETOC a monastery in Jerusalem. The Zagwe period was thus a period of peaceful coexistence with the Muslim sultanate. The similarity of the narrative of the EPRDF and Muslim activists is not limited to depicting the nation’s religious history as marginalization and inequality. Both narratives also attempt to disentangle the people from the ruling elites. In both cases, the primary culprits are those in power, not the Muslim or Christian religion adherents. In the fifth radio campaign of Dimitsachin Yisema, it was stated that:

...even if in the previous systems we had great problems at the state level, old-fashioned societal coexistence and social harmony makes us exemplary for the world. Our only beloved mother Ethiopia, different from the other parts of the world, is a nation where mosques and churches are built side by side throughout the country, a heritage that we will always be proud of... (My own translation from the original Amharic).

A similar tone is also expressed by the Muslim Diaspora delegates (EMDAC, 2007, p. 2):

Since we have to see separately the history of the state from the history of the people, we do not believe that the historic Christian and Muslim relations in Ethiopia were seriously flawed, bad relations (My own translation from the original Amharic).

Unlike the EPRDF narratives, however, some Muslim activists are quite vocal and direct in criticizing the EOTC. To them, the instigator of Ethiopian Muslim’s marginalization is the EOTC. For these activists, the church was a major culprit in inflicting injustice against Muslims and used the political system to advance its cause. In the words of one activist (Yimer, 2009):

In Ethiopia, state and religion have been two faces of a coin. For centuries, the church shaped the type of system that had come to exist. It is often said that political rulers used religion to advance their selfish agenda. In the Ethiopian case, however, the reverse seems to hold true. The church has been instrumental in bringing to and sustaining the power of that it believed would advance its agenda. As a result, it has positioned itself as a sole guardian of the country and the maker of its history (My own translation from the original Amharic).
The above sort of narrative is not entirely new; rather it is an extension of the same Al-Najāshī traditions in Islamic literature. The narrative explicitly said that the priests were of the opinion of handing over the immigrants to their own fellow citizens, if not for the king’s decision. And it is they who conspired later for his overthrow when they heard that he had become a Muslim (Muhammed, 2014):

*It is known that in the seventh century our country Ethiopia, after Mecca, was a nation that received Muslims. However, from that age itself, Islam has been considered as foreign and a source of threat. From its beginning, its fate was to be viewed as a foreign political phenomenon and a survival threat. This blind outlook denies the contribution of Islam to the overall development of Ethiopian culture, Muslims’ economic significance, the positive role for Islam in the expansion and development of literature, and in general its contribution to the multinationality of Ethiopian people* (My own translation from the original Amharic).

When one compares the depiction of Ethiopia’s religious history by the EPRDF with that of the Ethiopian Muslim activists, there is some level of consensus. The two converge at various points, albeit from different motivations. The convergence relates to the narrative of marginalization. Both thus appropriate the religious history for different ends. The EPRDF uses it to establish itself as an emancipator. In the process, however, the EPRDF conceives it as one of the diverse expressions of ethnic identity, not as an identity of its own. The narrative of Muslim activists, however, is quite different. For the activists, religious identity became a primary grid through which they understand and interpret the injustices of the past. In fact, for them, the so-called ethnic justice could be subsumed under religious identity. The atrocities of the past were primarily religious injustices, and only after that were they ethnic inequalities.

The religious diversity reform the state envisions championing is not equally sensitive to the EOTC adherents. In its attempt to redefine an inclusive nationhood that cherishes religious diversity, the past is greatly undermined. A future that is selectively informed by its past, however, requires much sacrifice from EOTC adherents. The implication is that in the new compromise EOTC adherents would feel that they are relinquishing much in order to embrace the newly redefined nationhood, which might feel unbearable.

The only feasible way to move forward is not falling into simplistic binary categorizations, but recognizing the complexities. The church also should be hailed for the positive role it played by providing a sense of belonging and national identity, even if that nationality and belongingness are far from the ideal. The political will to incorporate the previously marginalized faiths and challenge
the privileged status of the EOTC might be proper, but in no way should it discount from the EOTC’s contribution. It would have been quite possible to introduce a way of reforming, through pluralizing establishments without necessarily dismantling the already existing ones.

Under the sections about the depiction of Ethiopia’s religious history, I identified that marginalization plays a significant role in the EPRDF. Unlike the Muslim activists that set religious motivation as the primary cause, the EPRDF insists that the motivation is an economic one. In doing so, the EPRDF reduces religion to an instrument of its political agenda rather than an interpretive framework that governs the relationship of the religious states, be that the Muslim sultanates or the Christian kingdom, and their citizens. In relation to religious marginalization, the EPRDF also emphasizes a lot from the previous constitutions, primarily the fact that the EOTC was made the state church. In doing so, however, it also sets forth the EOTC as a victim rather than an oppressor. The Ethiopian Muslim activists, however, resist the state narrative, insisting that the religious causes were the primary motivation for the historical injustices and inequalities. More specifically, the activists present Haile Selassie as a king that marginalized the Muslim community for religious motives. I also showed the ambivalence of the EPRDF to label the EOTC as the primary beneficiary of the monarchical states and how the state creatively also includes the church as a victim.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I looked into the formation of the EPRDF as a coalition of four ethnic-based parties in line with the ethno-linguistic political program of TPLF. I also underlined the fact that the coalition’s junior-senior relationship created an informal arrangement between the coalition members. The relationship was not egalitarian, but rather the ethnic minority TPLF dominated both the formation and the periods after that. The result of such an arrangement for parties other than TPLF has been a lack of legitimacy as independent parties that represent the interest of the communities they represent. On the contrary, the arrangements enabled TPLF to play a more assertive role. There is a widely held perception that the parties have become instruments to impose the views of TPLF.

In the chapter, I noted that at the very center of the EPRDF’s political discourse lies its ethno-linguistic-based political organization. The political narrative of the EPRDF emphasizes the discourse of diversity and the failure of the previous states to address it. The discourse also has an economic narrative that asserts that the nation failed from its earlier glory days and is now making significant progress with the leadership of the EPRDF. The recognition of the earlier glory days also makes the present journey essentially a journey towards a renaissance, especially an economic one. The ethnic marginalization and the economic downturn journey are a creative mixture of the two long-held scholarly images of Ethiopia, a decline from the outpost of Semitic civilization in an
underdeveloped country that the EPRDF seeks to reverse. The failure to affirm the diversity of ethnicities and religions thus brought historical injustices, marginalization, and a downward economic journey. The EPRDF thus imagines itself as the liberator from past injustice and a trusted guide towards a prosperous Ethiopia through its developmental state political program.

In the marginalization narratives, the EPRDF strictly marks boundaries between the previous states and the citizens. In such a distinction, the account of evil goes to those in power, not to the people. On the contrary, the people were virtuous and resisted the unjustness they received. All the ills are the products of the nefarious states, and cultural tolerance is the manifestation of the character of the people. The efforts of the previous states are presented as attempts to crush the identity of the people, mistakenly perceiving that diversity is a danger to unity, which centers on the Amharic language and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. In this discourse, the previous states worked against the wishes of the people while the citizens promoted values of cultural accommodation and tolerance.

I also noted that the EPRDF is proud of the 1995 constitution. In its constitutional rhetoric, not only did the new constitution guarantee the prevailing marginalization, but also significant progress was made with the leadership of the EPRDF in the last quarter of a century. In revisiting the approaches of the previous states towards religion, the EPRDF asserted the political marginalization of Muslims. Even though the 1987 constitution at face value recognized the equality of religions, in practice the state had an anti-religious sentiment. The portrayal of the 1955 constitution is as an ill-informed unitary vision that crushed nations and nationalities and attempted to form an artificial identity devoid of diversity. The overarching conclusion of the narratives is that the imperial states used religion for a political cause, which was a heavy burden that dragged them into backwardness.

As the previous sections depicted, the EPRDF subsumed the religious marginalization under the ethnic marginalization narrative. The secondary role of religion in the EPRDF’s vision is very evident in the fact that the transitional charter does not speak of it. The religious marginalization narrative did recognize that others besides the non-Orthodox Christians were marginalized. In the depiction of religious marginalization, the primary motivation was largely economic and political in nature. Religious had only instrumental value, serving as a pretext. To this end, the EPRDF emphasizes the narrative that all religions promote equality, freedom, and peace. For the EPRDF, the political marginalization of religion falls under an ill-informed view of homogenization of the monarchs towards its diverse population. For Muslim activists, however, the political and economic marginalization of the Muslim community was mainly religious. To assert the religious motivation of the Christian kingdoms, the activists painted the Muslim sultanates and their Muslim subjects as victims. The activists, similar to the EPRDF, make distinctions between the people and the Christian kings.
The EPRDF feels at ease to name religions that did not gain equal footing with the EOTC. In the EPRDF’s narrative, the church itself was a victim since the monarchs interfered in its religious affairs. Thus, the church, even if it benefited in some way, remained the victim of the monarchical states. Muslim activists, however, look at the church as the closest ally of the state. Looking at the symbiotic relationship between the state and the church, they infer that the church was not only an instrument for the marginalization of Muslims but also the primary cause. For some of the Muslim activists, the church via the Christian kings caused the historic marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims from monarchical politics. The perception of the activists derives not from perceptively grasping the historical circumstances and the asymmetric nature of the symbiotic relationship between the church and the state, but rather from a desire to mobilize the religious community in line with religious ideals.

In terms of the conception of the present also, the state and the Muslim activists recognize the fact that the present constitution provided a legal framework where religious freedom and equality are possible. There is also a consensus that there are partisan practices carried out by state officials that favorably view their own religion and disfavor the other. For the EPRDF, these discriminations are not systematic and there are checks and balances that correct them. For Muslim activists, however, there is a systemic problem not only favors other religions but also looks suspiciously Muslims.

This section also contrasted how the EPRDF and Muslim activists creatively employ the past to advance their present concerns. The commonality of the narratives was the theme of the marginalization of Muslims from Ethiopian political and national life. The two, however, differ in explaining the underlying causes of the political marginalization of Islam, which for the EPRDF is an ill-informed view of homogenization of the diverse population, while for Muslim activists, however, the motivation was religious. The conception of the present is also that the new constitution, if followed properly, has set forth the necessary legal framework for religious freedom and equality. The difference is that for the EPRDF, the existing lags between the law and its practice are not systematic discriminations, but for the activists, there are still informal laws that constrain Muslims from fully integrating with national life and exercising their constitutionally enshrined rights.
Chapter Six: EPRDF Policy: Changes, Causes, Role, and Reaction (Pre-2001)

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the Ethiopian state policy towards Islam in terms of policy changes, causes that purported the changes, and the role and reaction of the Muslim communities in the pre-2001 period. The extent of the difference between the pre-2001 stance of the state and the post-2001 period warrants two distinct chapters. In doing so, the chapter examines the local, regional, and global factors in order to explore the present needs, interests, fears, and aspirations of the state as they are evident in the changing state’s policies. This chapter discusses the pre-2001 policy of the state while the next chapter (Chapter 7) deals with the post-2001 policies of the state.

6.2 Courting Support (A pre-1995 Stance)

In the following sub-sections, I begin from the transitional period of Ethiopian politics to provide a background for the newly ushered religious freedom (6.2.1). In analyzing the first half of the 1990s, the following sections explain significant developments. The religious or ethnic conflict section (6.2.2) looks into the transitional period conflicts that are very recently increasingly construed as Islamic radicalism. The second important issue that I discuss in the transitional period is the question of the Sharia courts (6.2.3). Given that TPLF remains the core of the EPRDF and its views dominate the EPRDF, I also revisit the pre-1991 stance of TPLF towards Islam (6.2.4). I also argue that the transitional period mainly viewed religious institutions as propaganda machinery (6.2.5) and provided religious freedom (6.2.6) for all religions, pragmatically responding to the resurgence of religion following the fall of the socialist government. In the final section (6.2.7), I argue that the Anwar Mosque incident and its aftermath should not be considered a watershed in the friendly stance of the state towards Ethiopian Muslims. The overall thesis that I argue for is that the state’s policy towards Islam was co-opting it to its political agenda.

6.2.1 Background

The years between 1991 and 1995 were transitional from a unitary state to an ethno-linguistic-based federal structure. The leadership of the EPRDF-dominated Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) via the interim National Charter ushered in the transition. Meles Zenawi was the interim president. Two hallmarks signify the period, the approval of the constitution and the national parliamentary election; both were significant in consolidating the power of the EPRDF. In these two crucial events, opposition parties that had a strong supporter base boycotted the election of the constituent assembly and the national parliamentary election on grounds of continual harassment, undemocratic processes, and undue pressures.
It is no wonder that in the June 1994 election, of the 548 seats in the House of Peoples’ Representatives, the EPRDF secured 484. If one adds the seats of EPRDF-affiliated parties, the seats lost were only two. Given that EPRDF contenders were newly formed weak parties and private candidates, it was not a victory among equals. The playing field for the EPRDF and the remaining candidates was far from even. The EPRDF-dominated constituency assembly finally ratified the constitution on December 8, 1994. As Lyons (1996, p. 121) notes, the political leverage of the EPRDF consisted of its military power, effective organization and leadership skills, and systematic control of the agenda and rules of competition. At any rate, the opposition parties that remained in the competition did not match the EPRDF’s control over local administration and its organization.

The making of the new constitution, which organized the affairs of the nation on the rights of nations and nationalities, was also an endorsement of the EPRDF’s multiethnic Ethiopia. Thus, the identity politics of the nation have become that of ethnic identities, and other group identities have been given a secondary role. The presumption was that an ethnic federation purportedly answers the nations and nationalities’ quest for independence. The approval of the constitution thus effectively completed the already there but not fully realized ethnic-based federal structure of the transitional period. In the words of Semahagn (2013, p. 202), “The political exercise in 1991 has been simply institutionalizing and legitimizing the political program of TPLF/EPRDF which was in the making underground before the making of the constitution.”

6.2.2 Religious or ethnic conflict?

The ethnic identity EPRDF seeks to champion was contested by religious identity. This is particularly evident in areas where ethnic identity and religious identity overlap. A case in point is the violent incidents in Arba Gugu, Bedeno, and the Asebot area. In order to understand these events, it is crucial to first outline the context. When the EPRDF ousted the socialist state of Ethiopia in May 1991, it did not have control of the whole Ethiopia. Parts of eastern Harerge, for example, were under the control of the OLF and IFLO. The nearby western Arsi, however, was under the control of the EPRDF, since OPDO operates in the area. Western Harerge and Western Arsi witnessed violent human rights violations in the year 1992. The killing and the torture in these areas was inhumane. Some of the victims were slaughtered, while others were pushed down into cliffs and ravines alive. The perpetrators did not show mercy even to pregnant women and innocent children. Even though the OLF and IFLO, which competed against OPDO for the political representation of Oromia, are not parts of the EPRDF, both had seats in the transitional state of Ethiopia at the time of the atrocities. The exact nature of the conflict and the responsible party is shrouded in mystery, causing the circulations of narratives and counternarratives. What is clear, however, is that the main victims were a people group from Amhara and Oromia. The casualties were from both sides. How, thus, are
these incidents to be understood? Were they religiously motivated and/or ethnically motivated? Since ethnic identities were more prominent, the framing of the violent incidents was primarily as ethnically motivated, thereby underestimating the religious elements of the conflict. The EPRDF’s narrative views the OLF as the instigator and the overall issue as one of narrow ethnic nationalism. Others construe TPLF as the terror engineer via its agent OPDO. Among EOTC adherents, however, there is a claim that the overall affair was an attack against Christians and Christianity by radical Muslims.

In the following section, I look into the human rights violations and the underlying causes of the incidents in Arba Gugu, Bedeno, and the Asebot area. According to different sources, leaving aside other damages, the casualties of human lives in Arba Gugu, Bedeno, and the Asebot area are estimated to be around 800 people. Interpretation of Arab Gugu’s killing and the Bedeno area as religious emanates from the fact that the killing was of the Christian Amhara ethnicities and there were incidents of burning of the churches. This interpretation was further strengthened given that the alleged perpetrators who were OLF members were also devout Muslims. Many, including the state, discount the event as religiously motivated, emphasizing ethnic politics as the underlying reason. For the critics of the state, thus, the killing of Amhara in the June 1992 incident of Arba Gugu was not the killing of those Amhara supporting the All Amhara People’s Organization (AAPO) by the state or pro-state militias. The accusation of the state in Arba Gugu among others derives from the fact that OPDO controls the area. The state’s statement also implicated AAPO as the perpetrator.

The incidents of Bedeno, however, are linked to the OLF. The victims included supporters of the rival and pro-state Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO). The November 2011 documentary titled after the Aramaic word, Akeldama, the field of blood, was released to document various terrorist activities on Ethiopian soil. The documentary specifically implicated the OLF as the perpetrator of the terror of April 1994 in Bedeno. The accusation of the OLF, among others, emanates from the fact that the area was under the OLF’s administration. Given the centrality of ethnicity in the politics of the time and the fact that the killing was based on political allegiance the underlying cause is likely more of an ethnic cleansing than religiously motivated. What has to be noted about these incidents is also that the victims were not only the Amhara but rather also the Oromo (Amnesty-International, 1995). What about the killing in Asebot? The EPRDF narrative considers it as an ethnically motivated terror.

I argue that the killing in Asebot and the Asebot monastery in May 1994 deserves separate treatment. The Islamic Front for Liberation of Oromia (IFLO) engineered the killing in Asebot. I could clearly infer the religious motivation of the incidents from two directions (Afendi, 2014; ZeTewahedo, 2012). First, the organization is Islamist-leaning. Secondly, the targets were Christians, including monks living in the Asebot monastery. The incidents in the Asebot monastery, thus,
imprinted a lasting memory that Islamic religious radicalism in areas where EOTC adherents are the minority is a threat. Following the 2006 and 2011 violent conflicts between Christians and Muslims, these events are interpreted more as religious than ethnic conflicts. The killing in Asebot and the monastery, thus, implies that the identity politics of the time also have religious elements even if the state narrative discounts that.

6.2.3 The question of the Sharia court

On top of the conflictual accounts, the quest for religious identity politics was also evident in the promulgation of the 1995 constitution of Ethiopia. In the constitution approval process, the Women’s Symposium of March 19-21, 1994 is of interest. The participants were over 500 women. The female representatives of nations and nationalities came together to discuss the draft constitution in relation to gender concerns. Among the issues raised, our concern is the discussion of cultural impediments. In this women’s meeting, the main concern was gender-based violence. Muslim women voiced their concern over religiously based oppression. In this discussion, Muslim participants carefully made distinctions. The distinction was between Muslims and Islam. The overall discussion among Muslim participants indicated the awareness of the participants that Islam as a religion is frequently accused of being a religion that mistreats women. To Muslim participants, the prevailing abuse among Muslims has nothing to do with the teachings of the religion or the Holy Quran. The abuses are by Muslim husbands that abuse the Quran, the self-serving interpretation of the Sharia law. In fact, not only did female Muslim participants defend positively the view of Islam towards women, but also the participants requested the application of the Sharia beyond limited family matters. In their view, the Sharia court status should be on par with the civil and criminal courts of the state.

In this same conference, there were also many other women who opposed the motion to recognize legally both customary and religious laws. In their opinion, the recognition of both would be a step backward in the protection of women’s interests (Meaza, 2003, p. 36). To such attendees, the recognition of cultural and religious laws is clearly a step backward in human rights. The debate has a historical context. The Sharia court operated on a de facto basis since the introduction of Islam in the country (Trimingham, 1952, p. 15). The official recognition of Muslim courts in Ethiopia dates back to the Italian invasion. It is the Italians that recognized as official the Muslim courts (Markakis, 2011, p. 117). The debate about the status of Sharia in the Ethiopian constitution indicates that some Muslims desired an increased role for religious identity in governing the public sphere.

The recommendation or resolutions of the symposium included the issue by consensus, adding that the state court should pay due attention to the specific necessities of the women rather than putting the Sharia law on par to address all civil and criminal matters (Usa, 2011, p. 126). The resolution of the women’s conference was in a way a compromise of these two voices. It recognized
customary and religious law in relation to “personal and family” matters on the condition that the parties show consent. Article 34 (on Marital, Personal, and Family Rights) Section five states: "This Constitution shall not preclude the adjudication of disputes relating to personal and family matters in accordance with religious or customary laws, with the consent of the parties to the dispute." Article 78 (5) also provides for the establishment or recognition of religious or customary courts, pursuant to Article 34 (5). In a way, the new decision did not bring anything new to the status of the Sharia courts except that it provided a de jure status.

There is also an immediate context to the debate. A look into the composition of the commission that drafted the constitution provides an insight. The 27-member constitutional commission that drafted the constitution had two organizations that are related to religion, of which one was the Ethiopian Muslim Youth League (Tesfaye, 2002, p. 82). At that time, the EMYL established a stronger tie with the Saudi Arabian Muslim League. The Islamic League of Saudi is a non-governmental religious body organized in Mecca and dedicated to spreading Islam (and consequently combating secularism). By 1970 many Islamic groups in the Arab world as well as Africa and Asia were represented in it – 27 in all (Ismael, 1986, p. 50). The globalized vision of the Ethiopian Muslims Youth League was evident in the agendas set forth in its frequent panel discussions and the public demonstration it organized on December 13, 1992. The demonstration was to show solidarity with Muslims in India when radical Hindus destroyed the 16th century Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh.

Following the disagreement in the Muslim communities, the Ethiopian Muslim Youth League (EMYL) in coordination with other Muslim NGOs led a public demonstration on November 28, 1994. One of the explicit points made in the public demonstration was requesting the implementation of Sharia beyond family matters, which was not received well by the state. Given the EMYL’s active role in voicing the concerns of the Muslim communities, its fundamentalist orientation and relation with the Islamic League of Saudi, its participation in the constituent assembly, and its record of accomplishment of forcing its views upon the wider community, the compromised solution that recognized customary and religious law for “personal and family” matters was unsatisfactory.

6.2.4 A pre-1991 stance of TPLF

Now that I have laid out the transitional periods and the religious issues that surfaced in relation to the Ethiopian constitution, I can venture into the EPRDF’s policy towards religions. At this point, it is proper to ask, “Where should I start to understand the period under consideration (1991-1995)?” The typical approach has been to start from 1991. All discussions related to Islam have just done that. Looking before 1991, however, has an advantage since the pre-1991 period provides insights that otherwise would be lost. Studying the EPRDF policy in the transition period thus requires
extending one’s observation into its pre-1991 stances. Such an approach is necessary because TPLF’s understanding of religion began to form and mature in its pre-1991 period.

The sudden introduction of TPLF, while the actual object of study is the EPRDF, seems to conflate two distinct parties into one. This is not an accident but rather a deliberate choice. In fact, the best way of describing the period is the hyphenation of the two, EPRDF-TPLF. Perhaps even more appropriate would be TPLF-EPRDF, given their respective senior-junior relationship. In the attempt to understand the EPRDF, one inevitably has to begin with TPLF. A special consideration of the TPLF from EPRDF coalition parties is essential because TPLF holds a central role in forming the opinion of the EPRDF. Thus, it is proper to ask the stance of TPLF in order to understand the formative periods of the EPRDF better. How TPLF treated religions in general and Islam in particular when it was a revolutionary party fighting as a guerrilla movement?

In understanding the pre-1991 stance of TPLF and the initial years of the EPRDF after it assumed power, two documents are decisive, namely the doctoral dissertation of Aregawi Berhe and the EPRDF’s position paper titled *Our revolutionary democratic goals and the next steps*. Aregawi was one of the founders of TPLF and its first chairperson. He completed his PhD in 2008 at Vrije Universiteit. His dissertation was titled *A political history of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (1975-1991): Revolt, ideology, and mobilization in Ethiopia*. In uncovering the pre-1991 stances, I looked into Aregawi’s thesis.

Aregawi’s thesis, besides its online availability for the public, was also published and distributed. The importance of the publication emanates from Aregawi’s prominent role in the early years of the party. He was not an ordinary member but rather one of the founding members and the first commander. Added to that, the dissertation was well received, especially among those who are critical of TPLF’s stance towards the EOTC. For these critics, the EPRDF has been systematically working to undermine the EOTC’s impact on the society. According to these critics, the document clearly reveals the fact that the EPRDF views the EOTC as an opposition force, since the latter espouses a vision of identity based on national unity, vs. the EPRDF’s version of ethnic ideology. Recognizing his role in TPLF, Internet-based Diaspora Islamic radio outlets made him a frequent featured guest. Muslim activists are also using the thesis of Aregawi to prove the interference of the state in their religious matters, reasoning that the power-craving TPLF employs the same strategy also towards Islam.

Thus, even if the publication of the thesis as a book did not bring to light an entirely new theory, I cannot underestimate its value in reinforcing an already held negative view of the TPLF-led EPRDF. With the publication, the relationship of the EPRDF and the EOTC was increasingly depicted as conflictual. The publication was thus received as an evidence for the conspiracy of TPLF and the EPRDF negatively and systematically working in disguise to dismantle the influence of the
EOTC. After Aregawi’s publication, the news went viral through private newspapers and various religious-oriented blogs implicating that the EPRDF has always been nefarious towards the establishment of the EOTC. EOTC adherents, who have an interest in contemporary politics, rarely pass up an opportunity to mention the document. A very popular blog among EOTC adherents comments about the book (Andi-Adirgen, 2012):

*The book, published by one of their members, clearly states that TPLF’s objective is to destroy EOTC. They think that the church’s stance towards unity is an obstacle to them. As a result, they will relentlessly work hard to end the unity of the church if possible. If that is not possible, their intent is to weaken it. During the previous 21 years, through Tamirat Layne (the prime minister of the transitional state of Ethiopia), they have succeeded to divide the church into an Ethiopian synod and immigrant synod (My own translation from the original Amharic).*

TPLF’s Marxist-Leninist orientation is beyond doubt. Despite its socialist heritage, however, officially the party never disavowed religion. On the contrary, it presented itself as a liberator of the marginalized Ethiopian religions, especially Ethiopian Islam. The favoring of Islam was for political expediency, given that the prominent leaders’ religious background was the EOTC. To infer from the leader’s Christian religious background that, for example, as Hearn (2006 p. 57) does, Christianity shaped the EPRDF to develop a favorable disposition towards the EOTC and marginalize Muslims is a far stretch and unfounded. Unlike the EOTC background of the leaders, the founding members’ allegiance towards Marxist-Leninist philosophy and the intent to use religion as a vehicle to political ends created the reverse, a favorable disposition towards Islam and a negative disposition towards the societal influence of the EOTC.

According to Aregawi, TPLF saw the long-oppressed Muslims of Tigrayan communities as a readily available ally in the struggle against the state and invested time and effort in mobilizing them. The party generously provided land in its reform programs even if the fact that Muslims were merchants rather than farmers precluded them from the land redistribution. The basic principle of land redistribution was set to benefit those who are earning a living out of it. In breaking its own law and redistributing land to the non-farming Muslims, the intent was to secure the allegiance of Muslims.

The TPLF leaders did not end with distributing land to the Muslim population that does not earn a living by tilling. Besides allotting land, they also involved Muslims actively in community meetings, thereby increasing their role in public life. Given that Tigrayan Muslims strictly observe Islamic precepts, religious issues also surfaced in these community meetings. TPLF leaders were
quite careful and systematically avoided contentious religious concerns like the application of Sharia. More than that, they created the illusion of fair representation in TPLF leadership by adopting Muslim names. These strategies, of course, paid off, and more Muslims increasingly joined the struggle against the socialist state (Aregawi, 2009, pp. 303-304). Mobilization of the Tigray Muslim population was not that difficult because in the imperial régime Muslims were marginalized from Ethiopian politics and unable to have land to till. In such undertakings, TPLF indirectly nurtured the collective memory of the marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims.

According to Aregawi, TPLF’s stance towards the EOTC was negative. The overall intent was to neutralize the influence of the EOTC in the society. The EOTC was a strong trusted religious institution in the area; it had a grip on the peasantry that TPLF desired to liberate. TPLF’s leadership calculated that a forceful collision would not be in its favor. After all, TPLF’s wisdom dictated that directly clashing with a trusted institution is both unnecessary and unproductive. Thus, the espoused strategy was to subvert its power indirectly while presenting itself as an ally to the church. Upholding the nationalization of the church’s property like the socialist state, moving the socio-economic focus of life from the church through the arrangement of meetings beyond the purview of the church, systematically indoctrinating its political programs, and infiltrating its well-established monasteries camouflaged as monks were a few strategies of TPLF (Aregawi, 2009, pp. 300-303). When one observes TPLF’s approach towards the EOTC, TPLF’s leadership was more positively inclined towards the Muslim followers than EOTC adherents were.

It has also been noted that TPLF refrained from offending religious sensitivities and imposed no restrictions (Henze, 2001, p. 292). Why did TPLF take a soft stance towards religions? Is it due to its ideology, or is it a strategy shaped by pragmatism? TPLF’s religious policy cannot be due to a differing ideology, since the party was no less socialist in orientation than the Derg. Both held a Marxist orientation towards religion and did not have a much more positive attitude towards religion. All the evidence points to pragmatism. The strategies of TPLF do indicate pragmatism, which was a rare phenomenon among the 1960s and 1970s youth movement in universities, of which the founding members were a part.

Most researchers describe the 1960s and 1970s generations as radicals, who envisioned a spontaneous change here and there. Unlike their companions of the time, TPLF leaders were sober in perceptively evaluating the society. They did not import everything within the socialist ideological baggage, but rather successfully appropriated it to their own context. The result was the mobilization of the religious to their end, despite socialism being their ideology. The strategy indeed was to use the church and at the same time undermine its authority from the peasantry. TPLF calculated that presenting itself as a champion of the marginalized and an ally of the EOTC would pay off by building needed support among the peasantry for its revolutionary agenda.
I could place the EPRDF’s pragmatism into a four-fold strategy. The strategies were a positivist analysis of the Ethiopian peasantry culture, a lesson learned from both the liberation movements of Eritrea and the anti-religious socialist state of Ethiopia and a calculated move for appealing to the Arab countries that were providing support. The approach of the Derg was a normative analysis of Ethiopian culture. A positivist analysis is an approach of examining the way things are, while a normative analysis is understood as a statement based on ideology or “the envisioned.” The first one is descriptive while the second is prescriptive in its nature. A prescriptive approach thus naturally becomes a top-down approach while the descriptive approach is usually a bottom-up approach.

The Derg operated normatively towards the Ethiopian society and lost sight of how deeply religious the Ethiopian society was. It did not realize that dishonoring the societies’ religious value, through its direct and indirect measures would undermine its objective of building a society after scientific socialism ideals. As it relentlessly attacked the society, it lost its ground and distrust developed. TPLF, however, began with a positive analysis. As a result, the leaders at a minimum acted and at most respected the values of the society, one of which was religiosity.

TPLF also learned from the failure of the socialist regime of Ethiopia. It realized that the socialist state’s anti-religious policy caused dissent among the Ethiopian population. Added to it, TPLF recognized and strategically approached the fact that the Tigray people whom it sought to represent are deeply religious. Tigray Christians and Muslims are both among the most traditional adherents of their respective faiths in Ethiopia. Both communities are conscious of their ancient origins. The religious institutions were uncomfortable due to the Derg’s animosity towards religion. Tigray Muslims also had other reasons to stand beside TPLF and oppose the Derg, as they were predominantly weavers, artisans, and Derg restrictions related to private business alienated them.

TPLF effectively learned a lesson from the revolutionary struggle of the Eritrean people. The Eritrean revolution formation had much to do with religion. In fact, the imperial presentation of Eritreans as a Christian nation and the measures taken in the new federal arrangement of Ethiopia had a lot to do with the initial reaction and revolt. The initial reaction, thus, was from a predominantly Muslim population of Eritrean ethnicity. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which started the armed struggle, begun as a sectarian Islamic movement whose ideology was pan-Arabism (Alemseged, 1998, pp. 111-115).

TPLF leaders noted that religion caused division and leadership strife among the Eritrean revolutionary forces’ struggle, which later resulted in the dominance of the Christians, even though the leadership of Muslim-dominated clans initially started the revolution. It seems that TPLF leaders learned quite a lot while playing a mediation role in the 11-year long civil war among Eritrean liberation armies. It seems that TPLF determined at the revolutionary stage that religion should not be the primary defining feature of ethnicities, given the fact that there is a plurality of religion, albeit
marginal, in all ethnicities of Ethiopia. TPLF thus learned the lesson that religion is a delicate instrument.

Muslim countries like Sudan provided the TPLF with military bases, medical facilities, and offices (Addis Getahun Solomon, 2007, p. 372). Part of the support of Eritrea’s freedom fighters was the perception that the imperial regime was suppressing and marginalizing Eritrea’s Muslim population. The strategic implication for TPLF is that it has to have a positive stance towards the Ethiopian Muslim population if it intends to marshal resources from Muslim countries. Ethiopia’s relation with neighboring countries, especially with Sudan and Somalia, has always been a reciprocation approach. The role of Egypt was also added to the picture. Sudan, as a proxy of Egypt and with a similar interest in the Nile River, supported any rebel group against the central state.

Somalia, due to its greater Somalia vision, similarly supported the rebels. The support came from the fact that TPLF pursued a secessionist agenda that endangered the unity of Ethiopia and weakened the nation’s capacity to utilize the Nile River. Even though the primary beneficiary of the support of Arabs was Eritrean secessionist movements, TPLF had also its own share both from Pan-Arab and Pan-Muslim states in the Middle East and Africa. When established in 1977, TPLF’s objective was the independence of Tigray from Ethiopian/Amhara domination. Such a delicate relationship hinged on the TPLF’s ability to present itself as the protector of the historically marginalized Muslim population of its own region.

In the above sections, due to the centrality of TPLF in the EPRDF, the policy of the TPLF by extension influenced the policy of the EPRDF. During this period, the policy was that of courting support from the Muslim communities and distancing EOTC leaders from the communities. Thus, the pre-1991 period policy of TPLF towards religions in general and Islam, in particular, was actively courting support from the religious communities. In courting the Muslim communities’ support, however, TPLF ensured that religion and religious issues were not the central issue around which everything revolved. Religion was thus handled with caution. The EPRDF’s religious freedom will thus be strained if there is a remote possibility that it overshadows ethnicity and becomes an instrument of political organizations. Religion has always had secondary importance, as one of the expressions of various ethnicities rather than becoming a supra-ethnic social identification of its own. TPLF neither attacked nor supported religious institutions unless it served its cause. This policy continued in the EPRDF’s transitional periods, where the state presented itself as a liberator of the historically marginalized Muslims.
6.2.5 Religion as propaganda machinery

The second important document studied has 68 pages. The EPRDF issued the document with the intent to indoctrinate its members in the strategies of the revolutionary democratic political programs. The document plainly and openly states the ideology of the EPRDF as of June 1993, clearly portraying its formative views and its stance in the transitional periods. The direct language the document employed led Markakis (2011, p. 233) to call it a “remarkably frank document.” Many researchers have used it as an insightful resource in order to understand the formative years of the EPRDF. Given its prominence, thus, it is quite unfortunate that the document is overlooked in relation to the EPRDF’s view of religions in general and Islam in particular. Owing to the importance of the document, the Ethiopian Register translated its abridged version into English and published it in 1996. The document lays out the party's long-term goals and strategies for attaining them. In this document, the religious institutions are under the section of propaganda machinery.

How did the EPRDF continue in the transitional period? Much did not change from the pre-1991 period of TPLF, reinforcing the fact that the hegemony of TPLF was sustained. The 68-page document that states the ideology of revolutionary democracy and various actions that it used towards the religious provides insight. The positioning of the religious institutions under propaganda machinery by itself indicates that the same policy continued in the transitional period. Religion is thus on par with schools, mass media, and various mass organizations. The overall approach was in general one of exploiting the religious directly or indirectly (TPLF/EPRDF, 1996, p. 28).

The document further characterizes the nature of religious organizations and upon whom shall be the focus. It also states how they could be used and how their influences reduced. The EPRDF’s assessment of religious organizations is generally negative (TPLF/EPRDF, 1996, p. 29). Since TPLF/EPRDF leaders were avowed socialists, their assessment is unsurprising. For the EPRDF, the religious organizations “are always propaganda tools who side themselves with the reactionary forces in the society.” As a result, it envisions that with the provision of scientific content in the school education. Thereby, there will be a declining role of religion in the society. The constitutional clause that dictates that all education has to be secular provides a different picture if one sees the effort from the perspective of envisioning a society in which the role of religious institutions declines. In light of its pragmatism policy, the document also puts forth strategies to curb their negative influences. The strategy is to transform the religious into vehicles that effectually disseminate the revolutionary agenda and thereby do not obstruct the objectives of the EPRDF. Despite its negative view towards religion, the document does not single out any religious society as a specific target.

In the document, a strategy of countering the influences of the religious organization is set. The strategy is generally just the opposite of the Derg state, which was a top-down approach that played
down the religious leaders at the grassroots level. For the EPRDF, the approach is bottom-up and hence the attention is not much on top leadership but rather leadership at the branch and village level, leaders that are indeed close to the heart of the people. Of course, the document prescribes the provision of due respect to the upper echelon of the religious leadership. Concerning the upper echelon, it states, “we should forge a closer relationship with this stratum, find out and exploit to our advantage their contradictions, and exploit to our advantage their internal contradictions.” The actions of the EPRDF towards Ethiopian Muslims and EOTC adherents have followed exactly what was set out in the documents.

The relationship of the EPRDF and the EOTC is not straightforward. A few months after the EPRDF seized control of the country, abunä Merkorios’ abdication and subsequent exile spurred controversy in the EOTC. Abunä Merkorios not only claimed that his abdication was unlawful but also continued to declare himself the lawful patriarch. Merkorios’ reclamation, however, did not secure support from the Ethiopian synod. The Ethiopian synod of the EOTC selected abunä Paulos as the new patriarch of the church in June 1992. As a result, in October 1992 the EOTC in the western hemisphere declared its administrative independence (Haustein, 2009, p. 123). According to EOTC rules, however, the patriarchate cannot be simply withdrawn from his office. The old patriarch must either pass away or be removed after a trial of the Holy Synod, neither of which took place.

The removal of abunä Merkorios and the subsequent appointment of abunä Paulos prompted differing opinions. For some, the allegiance of the patriarch to the previous communist regime necessitated a change in the patriarchate. The abunä, while he was the Archbishop of Gondar, was a member of the Derg Parliament in 1987. Others espouse an ethnic line argument in which the removal is fine-tuning the church in line with the new ethnicity. Thus, the abdication relates to the fact that the patriarch is an Amhara from Gondar. They strengthen their argument by adding that Paulos is a Tigrayan from Adwa, the birthplace of Meles Zenawi (Addis Getahun Solomon, 2007, p. 190). As evidence of the latter, Assefa (1996, p. 23) cites that upon his appointment the new patriarch dismissed scores of senior church leaders, and in 1993 he replaced 16 church leaders (all Amhara) with 16 Tigrayan. Whatever might be the actual cause, the effect was significant. According to canon law, there cannot be two patriarchs at any time. Now there are two competing synods, one in exile in the US and one in Ethiopia. It has to be noted that the two state-friendly patriarchs that were enthroned in 1975 and 1988 were not recognized by the Coptic Orthodox pope of Alexandria, and the new one is (Hirschkl, 2010, p. 224).
6.2.6 Religious freedom

In the transitional era, the EPRDF pursued a more liberal political atmosphere towards religion. The historically marginalized evangelicals and Muslims took their share and started publicly expressing their respective faiths. With the new freedom, both increased their global connections. The constructed memories of the state construed the marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims and evangelicals. Due to its opening up, Ethiopia has become a preferred destination for organizations or preachers that have transnational aspirations, especially those who have reform orientations. New Christian and Islamic NGOs have emerged as well, several from abroad and with clear proselytizing aims (Jon Abbink, 2011, p. 261). With the revival, there is stiff competition to dominate the country’s religious landscape. Congruent to the policy, the restrictions on Hajj and the import of religious literature ended. With the new policy and the contact with Saudi Arabia, the construction of many mosques and the creation of Islamic organizations, newspapers, and magazines became possible (Østebø, 2008, pp. 416-417).

It was on March 31, 1993, that the Muslim World League took over the confiscated public school of Awolia. Later, the school renamed itself as Awolia Muslim Mission School (MoE, 2011). Handing over the school strengthened its financial resources. A letter from the Muslim World League dated December 9, 1997 indicates the administration of the school fell under the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) from January 1998 onwards. In 2010, students enrolled in the school reached 5,000. According to a letter dated September 6, 2010, the school engaged in diverse activities and its beneficiaries reached over 40,000.

Unique features of the school are, among others, the provision of Arabic language and religious teachings to its students. The religious teaching provided, however, does not count to determine the grades of the students. A student, however, should earn a passing grade. Arabic, considered as a language course, counts for grading. Even though the school is located in the capital city and has a few more branches outside of the capital, its influences reach far. The school had a special summer program targeting both high school and university students in their summer time. It was with the school’s influence and other Muslim returnees of Saudi Arabia that a strictly literal interpretation of Islam started to get a stronger footing among the Ethiopian youth Muslim population. This does not mean, however, that all students who learned in the school have such a strict interpretation of Islam. The local Islamic papers used to complain more about the leniencies of the students in following Islamic precepts, such as failing to dress according to Islamic traditions.

The International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) origin dates back to 1978. It began operation during the Ethiopia-Somalia border war. Besides the Saudi state’s fund, IIRO marshals charities from private Arab donors. The major part of its financial contributions comes from private donations in Saudi Arabia, and an endowment fund (Sanabil Al-Khair) was established to generate a
stable income to finance its various activities. The distinguishing feature of IIRO is that it constructs mosques, and it implements its projects directly and does not subcontract work through any particular local NGOs (Sage, 2007, pp. 159-160).

IIRO’s establishment was as a humanitarian NGO that assists victims of natural disasters and wars all over the world, and it claims that 80% of the refugees and victims it helps are Muslims. Besides the provision of medical care and educational and social support, it also aims to encourage local entrepreneurs by sponsoring viable economic projects and small businesses that can help victims find employment and earn a living. To fulfill these objectives, the IIRO has established a wide network of national and international contacts with various Islamic and non-Islamic relief organizations, institutions, and individuals operating in several countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa. The European Intelligence Agency contends that assistance to Ugandan Islamists – from both al-Qaeda and the state of Sudan – was provided through various Islamic NGOs, of which IIRO was one (Haynes, 2007, pp. 321-322).

In the first half of the 1990s, the quota for Hajj travelers was greatly increased, and a free, private religious press became active. A large number of foreign Islamic teachers came to Ethiopia to teach at new Islamic schools, and many Ethiopian Muslims went for training abroad. With the connections with the global world, young scholars returning from Islamic universities abroad are increasingly replacing the older, traditional, uneducated sheiks. The young sheiks also bring substantial funding and build impressive mosques and Islamic schools (Shinn, 2005, p. 97).

“After 1991, the Muslim community of Ethiopia reconnected with developments in Islam worldwide through travel, studying abroad, and the activities of Islamic NGOs in Ethiopia, and international trade and business. As a result, reports of Islamic resurgence in Ethiopia are frequent” (Jon Abbink, 2007, p. 73). The increment in religious activities has also brought various reform movements into the religious landscape. With these new reform movements, the intensity of discourse within the Muslim communities increased. On the national level, however, it seems that the Ethiopian state has not paid much attention to the impact of the reformist Islamic interpretations. The state stance was not to provoke internal strife among the Muslim population except for trying to keep public activism under control.

Financial support from mostly informal, private circles in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States is funding Islamic revivalism and expansion in Ethiopia. Towards the end of reinvigorating Ethiopian Islamic practice along strict, literalist lines, they established more “religiously correct” interpretations and practices. To this very end, Ethiopians went to study in the Middle East, upon return established new schools and organizations, and hosted Islamic conferences. Besides Muslims receiving religious training abroad, many translations of Egyptian, Pakistani, Sudanese, and South African books on Islam were published, thus showing the reconnection of Ethiopian Islam to global
Islam. This also led to the growing and persistent denigration of forms of local Islam and Sufism in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora also maintains a very strong presence in cyberspace with vibrant websites, blogs, and Internet radio outlets, and it holds annual conventions and conferences to assess current social and political issues pertinent to Ethiopian Muslims. With the fall of the Derg, the Oromo exiles influenced by Wahhabi doctrines returned home. During their stay abroad and the new liberal religious policies of the state, contact with coreligionists in other countries that supported the establishment of mosques, schools, and associations has also become more possible. Among the latter were two entities in Addis Ababa: the Ethiopian Muslim Youth Association founded in 1990 and linked with the Riyadh-based World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY), and the Awolia Mission School (Østebø, 2008, p. 421).

According to Østebø (2013, p. 1040), the year 1995-1996 “…signaled a revision in the regime’s attitudes and policies towards Islam.” He designates the years as marking the launch of a policy of containment, increasing surveillance and control due to fear of radicalization of Islam in Ethiopia. In fact, the years 1995-1996 were full of traumatic episodes in relation to Muslims in Ethiopia. The strife concerning the legitimate leadership of the EIASC caused the loss of many lives at the Anwar Mosque in Addis Ababa in 1995. The result was the arrest of many Muslims and the closing of Islamic organizations and newspapers. The assassination attempt against President Hosni Mubarak also occurred in the same year. The Somali al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya also detonated bombs both in Addis Ababa and in Dire Dawa. Indeed, those events were watersheds in the relationship between the state and Islam. Given such episodes, it is essential to ask whether these events mark a genesis of the policy of containment towards Islam or not. The answer is negative on two grounds. First, the above-mentioned events were not organized movements as such. Second, the events that followed clearly showed that most of the halt was temporary. In order to show that the halt was temporary, each of the events has to be looked independently. The discussion of the next section is only about the Anwar Mosque incident, and I will look at the other incidents in the subsequent section that discusses the second half of the 1990s.

6.2.7 The Anwar Mosque incident and its aftermath

The Anwar Mosque incident of February 21, 1995, incurred casualties in the form of 10 Muslim lives. In unpacking the incident, the overall stance of the state towards any opposition and dissent should be examined. The measure taken and the casualties that followed among the Muslim population are not unique in light of the EPRDF’s actions. The EPRDF silenced all organized opposition and dissent. One could look at the EPRDF’s violent and brutal response to Addis Ababa University students protesting the Eritrean independence referendum scheduled for January 1993. The confrontation caused a loss of life, the dismissal of the university president and vice presidents
and 42 academic staff members, and the closure of the university for one semester (Balsvik, 2006, pp. 1022-1023). Now, let us look into the immediate context of the incident.

The incident in the mosque unfolded due to the leadership election of the EIASC on October 18, 1993. The newly elected leadership of the EIASC, within a month after the election, decided to monopolize the religious space of the Muslim communities. It passed a resolution requiring the closure of other Islamic organizations. Its decision was on the ground that their services are redundant with that of the national level EIASC. Its decision indicates, among others, its ambition to continue its own historical legacy, as the only legitimate nationwide Islamic institution that represented the Muslim population. Both the EOTC and evangelical Christians also had similar nationwide representative organizations. The decision, of course, met with strong opposition since the very survival of the other Islamic organizations was threatened. At that time, the prominence of the Ethiopian Muslim Youth League (EMYL) association among the urban youth was prominent. EMYL’s transnational Islamic ambition was also evident in the agendas it set. The contemporary issues of Muslims in India and Bosnia were frequent discussion topics in its panels. Besides discussing transnational Islamic issues, EMYL also organized a public demonstration in which 10,000 participated, supporting the cause of their coreligionists in India and Bosnia.

Following the new religious liberation, the EIASC’s importance also grew both locally and abroad. Through its international connections, the association was able to marshal from abroad both material and financial resources. As an example, in one incident, it reportedly received 22 trucks and 6 million Birr as a donation. During this period, the EIASC started to charge fees to Hajj travelers to Mecca. The fees and the donation thus gave it a solid resource base for conducting its operations. With increasing resources, however, it showed little improvement in service provision, causing a growing level of dissatisfaction among the Muslim communities. The issue of corruption also took center stage in discussions among the youth. The mounting opposition eventually led to the public demonstration of November 28, 1994. The demonstration voiced its dissatisfaction with EIASC leadership and other concerns.

Of the 11 requests, the request for the appointment of Muslim ministers and the application of Sharia beyond family affairs are our concerns. The public demonstration implied that religion is also becoming a competing group identity mark beside ethnicity. I could also note that the demonstrators’ request for an increased application of the Sharia law beyond family matters indicates that the youths were unhappy that the legal jurisdiction of Sharia was limited only to family affairs. Besides the discontent, there was also a sense of optimism that as per their request the status of Sharia, upon the approval of the constitution, would improve beyond family matters. The central question of the time was the deposition of the authoritarian chairperson of the EIASC, Hajji Muhammad Awol.
Reportedly, the response of Meles Zenawi, the transitional president, was, “As you have appointed them you can depose them.” For most of the protesters, the remark signaled a positive signal to remove EIASC leaders. In line with the green light received from the state, on January 22, 1994, a charge was filed against the president of the EIASC, Hajji Muhammad Awol. In the absence of the accused, the Sharia court decided upon his disposition. The accused, however, appealed to the federal court, which reversed the decision in his favor. The reversal of the federal court was on the ground of jurisdiction, arguing that the issue cannot be settled in Sharia court, since the mandate of the court is family issues and this charge was clearly beyond that. It is within this context that the Anwar Mosque incident took place. Given the circumstances, the immediate action of the state was to close the five Islamic associations that were active in the process. Thus, inferring from this that the state started a containment policy is an unsustainable claim.

The 1995 incident of the Anwar Mosque clearly reflects the power struggle between the leadership of the EIASC and the youth. In the opinion of the youth, the EIASC failed to lead the Muslim communities in the changing world. In their assessment, the EIASC was behaviorally corrupt and functionally inept to lead the Muslim communities. The solution was to resolve the matter in an Islamic way, the application of the Sharia. In contrast, EIASC leaders failed to see the need for other Islamic institutions that redundantly perform the same function. As a national level Islamic organization that officially represented Ethiopian Muslims, the EIASC finally decided to dismantle other NGOs.

To the youth and Islamic NGOs, the decision of the EIASC was not only outrageous but also without legal basis. In fact, legally speaking the EIASC did not have the mandate to determine the existence of other Islamic organizations. After all, the two institutions were equals. When the Muslim communities failed to answer adequately their own question, the state interfered in the matter. Of course, its interference was to side with the EIASC since it has a national level representation that serves well for political expediency. Clearly, the state interfered to abate the mounting unrest in the Muslim communities, not to contain Muslims or Islam within the confinement of Ethiopia.

Besides the state’s actions against Islamic institutions, merely detaining and charging the leaders would have closed these organizations. Their shutdown would have been inevitable given that most of the funding of the association was from the private network, and the detaining of their leaders put an end to these connections. Of course, following the incident, there was a temporary halt in Islamic activities in early 1995. Besides the works of the closed Islamic associations, Islamic publications dwindled. The temporary nature of the interaction is evident since in late 1995 and early 1996 the publication of a number of journals resumed (A. Hussien & Wagner, 2003, p. 65).
notes, those publications that resumed continued being highly critical of the leadership, especially the EIASC (A. Hussien, 1998, p. 19).

Here one should ask how the state treated Islamic NGOs in the pre-1995 period. One of the contentions of Muslim activists is that the state treated Christian NGOs favorably, while their counterpart Islamic charities were viewed negatively. To the activists, such a stance by the state emanates from the unfounded allegation that Islamic NGOs are channels of laundering money for disguised terror activities. In this line Adem Kamil Faris (2012), who was one of the leaders of dissident Muslims, defends Islamic NGOs, saying they are not money transferring channels from radicals. He said,

Even if we say the money has come, we should ask for what channel it used. If we have received the money in the name of charitable organizations, Christians have more charities. Before the re-registration, they were about 4,000 and now reduced to 2,500. Islamic charities before registration, however, were only six and now none of them exists. If there is a charity of Saudi Arabia, would you mention its name?

His rhetorical statement is very clear; the Christian NGOs’ treatment is not on par with that of the Muslims’. A feature article in Muslims Issue Magazine also reports an unnamed scholar (Ishaq, Akimel, & Solomon, 2010, p. 7) as saying, “The main problems are that our NGOs are viewed with suspicion by the state. Their NGOs acting freely make thousands of kāfir but our NGOs are suspect of terrorism and they are viewed with an evil eye whenever they are asking for the license.” To what extent is such a claim justified? To answer this, one should look into the EPRDF’s relations with charitable organizations in general and more specifically Islamic charities.

When the state ousted the previous socialist state, the new state was short on finances and opened itself to any sources without scrutinizing in detail the nature of the sources. As most observers agree, in the initial period of attempting to marshal financial resources they did not attach any strings to any helping hands. As a result, the period was not characterized by scrutiny of identity (Bellucci & Zaccaria, 2009, p. 110). Thus, both local and international NGOs flourished throughout the country irrespective of religious affiliations. In fact, it is true that the largest proportionate increase was from non-Islamic NGOs. Islamic NGOs grew from none to 8.7% by the year 2000 (Waal, 2004, p. 156).

Most of the newly established local NGOs that began operation made their way by writing grant proposals and soliciting external funds from mainly external donors. The pre-1991 period NGOs, with the exception of international relief organizations, were mainly affiliated with the Christian faith.
or were secular NGOs. Naturally, due to the expertise and skills, they developed within the Christian or secular NGOs, Christians were more successful in opening new NGOs.

The lag of Islamic NGOs’ growth when compared with their Christian counterparts also related to the narrower resource base from which they could solicit funds, mainly the rich Gulf States. Most of the Islamic reformers that had contacts not only lacked the expertise and skills to run NGOs, but also their primary interest was guided by the reformist religious zeal rather than participating in broader developmental activities. As a result, it sufficed for them to secure funds from privately established networks without much of an organized structure. The shortage of Islamic NGOs thus cannot be attributed to the state’s policy rather that the orientation was towards reforming Islam. The Islamic communities also lacked previously accumulated skills and expertise in relation to developmental activities. This is clearer when one observes the number of mosques built in various parts of the nation through private networks with the Gulf States.

More specifically, the dearth of Islamic NGOs and the closure of some also have much to do with the Anwar mosque incident. The Anwar mosque incident of 1995 signifies the internal power struggle to represent the Islamic communities reaching its apex. The incident escalated to the extent that life was lost among them. In line with that, the state entered into the process as arbiter. In the process of arbitration, some Islamic NGOs and related Islamic schools were closed. One could note that none of the above measures was really a direct attack against Islamic NGOs; rather, they were part of the state’s measure to establish peace and stability within the Muslim communities. Of course, there is the question of justice and fairness in the way the state sided with the EIASC. Following the event, however, the state started to securitize Islamic-related issues by siding de facto with the EIASC, who eventually became the central and sole institution through which other Islamic institutions are controlled. To date, the recommendation of the EIASC is necessary for the establishment of any Islamic religious organizations. Following that, it has become quite common to hear reports that the registration process of Islamic NGOs is never easy and the EIASC is not showing the cooperation it should in the process.

### 6.2.8 Conclusion

The overall objective for looking at the first half of the 1990s was to discern the Ethiopian state policy towards Islam. In doing so, I pointed to the approval of the constitution and the conducting of the national parliamentary election as important hallmarks in which ethnic identity earned a priority in Ethiopian political discourse. The centrality of ethnicity in politics caused also new conflicts that some interpreted as religious while others ethnic. I have argued that the conflicts reflected a complex relationship between religious and ethnic identity, even though the latter dominates over the first. I also looked into the Women’s Symposium of March 19-21 to establish that the Islamic reform
movements in Ethiopia aimed to increase the role of Islam in the public life of the Muslim community. The resurfacing of Sharia law in the November 28, 1994 public demonstration also indicates that some members of the Muslim communities were dissatisfied with the legalization of the de facto operation of the Sharia courts. In this section, I also brought attention to the fact that the trans-local character of Islam in Ethiopia increased as it connected with its coreligionists around the globe. The changes are the result of the influence of connections with coreligionists outside Ethiopia, especially with Saudi Arabia, following the new decree on religious freedom.

In unpacking the pre-1995 policies of the EPRDF, the section underlined the necessity of looking beyond 1991 to when TPLF’s attitude towards religion both formed and matured. In this line, I argued that despite the EOTC’s background of the founding members, the allegiance towards Marxist-Leninist philosophy and the use of religion as a vehicle for political ends led the regime to have a favorable disposition towards Islam and a negative disposition towards the societal influence of the EOTC. The positive disposition towards Islam was evident in its land reform program, its relation to neighboring and other Muslim countries that supported TPLF, the marginalization narrative it espoused among Muslims, and tactics it used to create an impression of the higher proportion of Muslim representation in its top leadership.

Overall, the TPLF religious policy towards religion and more specifically towards Islam operated primarily on the principle of pragmatism rather than strict ideological commitment. The pragmatism of TPLF led to the recognition that Tigray Muslims are religious, advancing anti-religious policy is politically disadvantageous in a religious society, putting religion at the center of politics is divisive in a religiously diverse society, and presenting oneself as liberators of Muslims secures more resources for its cause. Thus, the pre-1991 period policy of TPLF towards religions in general and Islam, in particular, was to actively court support from the religious communities.

In this section, I also asked whether the pre-1995 period’s policy of the EPRDF was different from the pre-1991 period. In the transitional era, the EPRDF pursued a more liberal political atmosphere towards religion. The historically marginalized evangelicals and Muslims took advantage of this opportunity and started publicly expressing their respective faiths. With the new freedom, both increased their global connections. The section also looked at greater length at the Anwar Mosque incident and its aftermath. It argued that radicalization of Muslims in Ethiopia was not as such an issue throughout the period.

As the above analysis showed, EPRDF policy courted support from the leadership of the Muslim communities. Even the events did not indicate the regime’s change of policy towards Islam, but rather were temporary setbacks. Most of the conflicts were one-time incidents and stayed low in profile. The Anwar incident, however, was traumatic and had a greater impact. Yet despite a temporary halt following the Anwar Mosque incident of 1995, things then resumed their usual
course. In this period, Islam was not yet treated as a security threat by the EPRDF, but rather it was favored. In the pre-1995 period, the EPRDF successfully branded itself as the liberator, a party that brought to an end the political marginalization of its Muslim population.

6.3 An External Threat (1996-2001)

In the pre-1995 period, I argued that despite the temporary watershed that followed the internal power struggle among the Muslim communities, the state’s stance towards Islam and Muslims not only remained positive but also actively courted support from them. In the following sections, I argue that in the second half of the mid-1990s also, the state’s policy towards Islam and Muslims did not significantly change. This does not mean there was not a policy change between 1996 and 2001. Indeed, there was a policy change, but the nature of the change was not that radical. It was a slight detour. The remark of David Shinn, the then-US ambassador to Ethiopia, sheds light. He said, “In the mid-1990s, however, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi commented that the most significant long-term threat to Ethiopia’s security is Islamic fundamentalism. At that time, the principal external threats emanated from Somalia and, especially Sudan” (Shinn, 2002, p. 1).

The assessment of the late Prime Minister Meles was not an exaggeration, given that there were clear and present dangers from Islamic fundamentalists. Of course, the threat source was not the Ethiopian Muslim communities but rather the neighboring two nations, Somalia and Sudan. Clearly, there were high-profile attacks on Ethiopian soil, the assassination attempt of Abdul-Mejid Hussein and the assassination attempt of Hosni Mubarak. There were also bombing incidents, for example the bombing of the Ghion Hotel in Addis Ababa and the Ras Hotel in Dire Dawa. The failed assassination attempt of Egypt’s president, with the help of the state of Sudan, was in June 1995. Even though the incident took place in 1995, I discuss it under the post-1995 policy of the state. Such a choice is inevitable given that the event seriously strained the relationships between the two countries and especially so after the January 1996 UN resolution against the state of Sudan in abating terrorism. The perception of Islamic religious fundamentalism also led Ethiopia to wage war against the Somalia-based al-Ittihad al-Islam (AIAI).

In the following section, I attempt to show that the EPRDF’s primary perception of Islamic fundamentalism was as mainly an external threat. With the conceptual distinction of an internal threat with an external one, I argue that the state’s policy towards Islam did not attempt to contain or securitize its own Muslim population, even though the neighboring countries sponsored Islamic terror in Ethiopia.

In light of this objective, the overall attempt of this section is to argue that the state policy changed, but the change did not target Ethiopian Islam but rather Islam as an imported fundamentalist ideology from Somalia and Sudan. The continued friendly stance of the EPRDF
towards its own Muslim population and the religion of Islam clearly continued. The temporary halt that we discussed in the first half of the 1990s was reversed in the second half of the 1990s. This does not mean the attacks did not have a spillover effect. They added to a historic psyche of Ethiopians that counts any ideological import from the outside as a disestabishing force for the nation. The following section discusses Ethiopia in relation to the Ogaden area conflict with Somalia and Sudan in relation to the events surrounding the assassination attempt on Egypt’s president.

In the external threat sub-section, I look into developments related to the neighboring countries, namely Somalia and Sudan. In relation to Somalia, I present the thesis that Ethiopia had an interest in destabilizing Somalia (6.3.1) and the three-fold strategies the Ethiopian state outlined in its foreign policy document to deal with developments in Somalia. I also presented how the Ethiopian state monitored the changes in Somalia in light with its interest (6.3.2). I looked also the historical relation of Somalia with Ethiopia (6.3.3), the involvement of Somalia in the Ethiopian Somali Regional State (6.3.4), and the agenda of opposition parties operating from neighboring Somalia (6.3.5). In relation to Sudan, I also establish that the initial relations were cordial (6.3.6) and deteriorated as Sudan participated in aiding the assassination attempt of the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, on Ethiopian soil (6.3.7). Towards the end of the 1990s, however, the two countries’ cooperation resumed with the Ethio-Eritrean war (6.3.8). The overall thesis of the second half of the 1990s is that there was an Islamic fundamentalist threat from Sudan and Somali, and yet the state’s relationship with Ethiopian Muslims remained cordial.

6.3.1 Ethiopia’s role in destabilizing Somalia

The protracted statelessness of Somalia brought various explanatory proposals. One of these is that Ethiopia conspired towards the perpetual collapse of the state of Somalia. This thesis argues that Ethiopia could maintain its territorial integrity only if there is a weaker Somalia that fails to reclaim the old dream of a greater Somalia (K. Menkhaus, 2003, p. 406). The presumption of the argument is that Ethiopia’s peace hinges upon the fact that there is not a strong central state in Somalia. In this line of thinking, the failure of Somalia is a blessing in disguise for the Ethiopian state. The anti-establishment role of Ethiopia supposedly ranges from supporting disestabishing factions to installing its own puppet that does not have national legitimacy. The Ethiopian state is aware of this very charge. If the suggestion is true, the Ethiopian state should hold a belief that a weak Somalia provides neither a safe haven nor the ability to sponsor anti-Ethiopian rebel forces.

At least the official diplomatic rhetoric of Ethiopia runs against the thesis. In the rhetoric, a weak neighboring state contributes negatively to its own stability. The state’s official stance, contrary to the weak Somalia thesis, maintains that the instability of Somalia poses much more of a threat than a peaceful and developed Somalia. The foreign policy document (2002, p. 77) prepared
by the Ministry of Information (MoI) vehemently and explicitly states that pursuing an instability policy towards Somalia is “fundamentally wrong and dangerous.” The EPRDF’s official policy is thus to nurture sustainable peace and stability through the promotion of development and democratization in Somalia. It is in this line that the state explains the various interventions and interests in Somalia.

After Somalia became a failed state, Ethiopia was involved in the effort of building political reconciliation and stability in the state of Somalia. Notable examples were the two international conferences convened in Ethiopia. In the year 1993, Addis Ababa convened two internationally sponsored peace conferences in the months of January and March. Attended personally by Butros-Butros Ghali, the January conference laid out a broader roadmap that brought to the roundtable discussion 14 independent political movements. Following the roadmap, on March 15 the leaders signed an agreement. The agreement included, among others, the establishment of a transitional national council. The Sudanese ambassador to Ethiopia, Uthman al-Sayyid Fadl, mediated a cease-fire agreement (Burr & Collins, 2003, p. 117). Both conferences, however, did not bring much fruit and the situation deteriorated much more afterward.

After various efforts by the United Nations to keep peace and stability, in March 1995 United Nations Operation Somalia II (UNISOM II) exited from the nation. Following the US/UN troops’ withdrawal from Somalia, Ethiopia’s involvement as the dominant external player in Somalia began (Ismail, 2011, p. 39). According to the foreign policy document, Ethiopia had three options to respond to the stateless Somalia. The statelessness of Somalia led the Ethiopian state to follow a three-part “damage-limitation” approach: supporting regions that are more stable, monitoring forces of extremists and terrorists, and cooperating in the peace building efforts of its people and the international community (MoI, 2002, pp. 81-82).

The above three strategies could also be subsumed under the weak state thesis strategies. Extending support for stable regions, Somaliland and Puntland, might be viewed negatively as a covert strategy to challenge the establishment of a unitary state. The accusation holds more water in the case of Somaliland since it has made clear its secessionist agenda since 1991. The international community, however, has not granted it sovereign independent status. Puntland also declared temporary independence in 1998. Unlike Somaliland, which envisions independence, Puntland continues to espouse the unity of Ethiopia. The fact that Somaliland unofficially seceded from Somalia in 1991 and the positive support it received implies that Ethiopia also backs the secessionist agenda. Watching extremism and terrorism could also mean claiming a free license for raiding Somalia whenever it feels that its interest is endangered. Ethiopia’s keen interest to be involved in the peace building effort might also be an attempt to install a faction that favors Ethiopia’s interests.
6.3.2 Ethiopia’s interest in Somalia

The Ethiopian concern in Somalia, however, exhibits three things. First, Ethiopia is cautious and works against any hint of the “Greater Somali” dream resurrecting from its grave of 1991. The foreign policy document of Ethiopia (2002, p. 73) describes the greater Somali dream as “an empty dream,” without losing sight that it has been a source of conflicts and hostility. Any sign of ambition to resurrect the greater Somalia dream is thus perceived as a threat to Ethiopia’s territorial integrity. Second, a corollary to the first is the possibility that the nation would continue to support anti-Ethiopian forces that disturb the internal peace. Historically, Somalia has been known to support and provide a safe haven for various armed opposition struggles in Ethiopia. Thus, the Ethiopian state opposes parties that might have a negative image towards Ethiopia.

Third, Ethiopia also harbors a fear that the nation might become a safe haven and conduit for terrorists and extremists, more so as the nation is dragged into political chaos. More specifically, it fears that radical Islamic extremism might be imported into Ethiopia. Any development in Somalia that fails on these three yardsticks is viewed negatively by Ethiopia. In this light, it is no wonder that Ethiopia shows a keener interest than the international community does in the affairs of Somalia, considering it as a security threat. The threat could express itself as the endangerment of territorial integrity, the provision of support to anti-Ethiopian forces, and Islamic fundamentalism.

Prior to September 11, 2001, the international community’s interest in Somalia’s prolonged crisis was mainly driven by humanitarian causes (K. J. Menkhaus, 2004, p. 49). The mandate of the United Nations Political Office for Somalia, which was established on April 15, 1995, was basically entrusted to monitor the situation in Somalia and keep the Security Council informed about developments affecting the humanitarian and security situation, repatriation of refugees, and impacts on neighboring countries (UN, 2009, p. 64). It was only after later events unfolded on East African soil and challenged the initial perception that the UN shifted in the direction of the Ethiopian state’s view of Somalia as a security threat. The anti-US jihadists’ simultaneous bombings of the US embassy in Kenya and Tanzania created a perception of East Africa as the initial battleground. It is with these events that the international community started to view greater East Africa and the Horn of Africa as strong footholds of jihadists. The fear is that Somalia, as a stateless nation, has the potential to harbor a destabilizing influence in the region (Jhazbhay, 2008, p. 183). Such a development had an advantage to the legitimization of the EPRDF in the international community; the EPRDF could portray itself as an ally that could resist the security threat in the region.
6.3.3 Historical relations: Somalia and Ethiopia

The fear of Islamic fundamentalism as a threat would require a consideration of recent incidents in light of historical realities. The center-periphery relationship of Ethiopia was always problematic, especially the Ogaden area of the Ethiopian Somali region. It was in 1897 that the Ogaden area was formally incorporated as Ethiopian Somalia (Kendie, 2003, p. 71). Since then, however, the territory has a reputation of being a conflictual zone for the two nations, more so after the independence of Somalia. After the 1960s independence, the state of Somalia used all possible means to undermine the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. The Somali government not only made repeated appeals at the Organization of African Unity (OAU) but also supported armed insurgents in the Ogaden area. Right from the 1961 Monrovia conference, the Ogaden area was a running dispute that seized attention until the fall of the Derg state (Fasehun, 1982, p. 183). The general stance of African states was in favor of Ethiopia and rejected Somalia’s argument, obliging it to respect the colonial borders. Such decisions, however, did not frustrate Somalia’s dream of forming “a greater Somalia.”

Somalia joined the Arab League in 1974 (Ismael, 1986, p. 58). The decision did not please Ethiopia. Ethiopian states generally looked at the Arabs suspiciously, as a disestablishing force of the nation, mainly due to four reasons. First, the historic prominence of Egypt in Pan-Arabism left a legacy of Egypt as an attitude-forming nation for Arabs on matters related to Africa. Arabs were supporters of Egypt, who desired a weak Ethiopia so that Ethiopia’s claim over the Nile basin would not materialize. Second, the Arab countries also generally supported the greater Somalia agenda. Third, the Arab countries had been supporting Ethiopia’s opposition parties that had a secessionist agenda as proxies that advanced a weak Ethiopia. Fourth, there was also a perception that the Christian state of Ethiopia marginalized its Muslim subjects. Thus, Lewis, quoted in Jhazbhay, captures succinctly the Ethiopian fear. The fear was that joining the Arab League might make the Somali state’s “internal policies and external alignments much more directly susceptible to the powerful scrutiny of the conservative Arab states” (Jhazbhay, 2008, p. 177). Later developments proved that Ethiopia’s fear was real.

Following the fall of the imperial regime, tendencies to self-determination of nations and nationalities increased in Ethiopia. Among the groups, fighting against the Ethiopian central state was the Ogaden-based Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), to which Somalia gave substantial logistic support as early as 1975 in an effort to take Ogaden from Ethiopia. By the summer of 1977, the WSLF was making considerable progress in Ogaden. It enjoyed a high degree of popular support and roamed freely in the countryside, though it controlled no urban areas (Weisburd, 1997, p. 37). Part of its popularity in Ethiopian Somalia is because the Ethiopian-Somalis did not enjoy much the new arrangement of becoming part of Ethiopia nor the burden of taxation by the central state. The apex of the relationship reached its climax between 1977 and 1978 when the two countries went to
war, which ended in the defeat of the Somali state. Even after being decisively defeated, the state of Somalia continued its involvement in forming, arming, and directing rebel forces in the Ethiopian Ogaden land.

The Arab League support for Somalia in this matter conflicts with Ethiopia in two ways. First, league members like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the Gulf States provided support for various elements of Eritrean guerrilla movements (Ismael, 1986, p. 61; Weisburd, 1997, p. 39). Others directly supported the Somalia state; for example, Egypt’s support of Somalia during its war against Ethiopia in 1977 was a case in point. In fact, Egypt also supported Somalia against Ethiopia in the 1964 war. Egypt’s President Nasser, who was a pan-Arab nationalist charismatic leader, sent rifles to the Somali army. The Arabic inscription tells Egypt’s policy towards Ethiopia. It was written, “Mautul Habash, Wa Hayat al-Somal” (Death to Ethiopia and Long Live Somalia) (Jhazbhay, 2009, p. 4). Given such historical context, thus, it is important to ask how EPRDF related to the Ethiopian Somali Regional State.

6.3.4 Somalia in the Ethiopian Somali Regional State

Ethiopia’s Somali Regional State came into existence when the EPRDF federalized the country on an ethnopolitical basis. The Somali people are almost entirely Muslims. The Somali region was the second largest region following Oromia in the newly federated Ethiopia. The contested geographical zone of Ogaden constituted a demographic majority in five out of the nine administrative zones of the regional state (Hagmann & Korf, 2012). In the post-1991 rule of the EPRDF, the Somali-inhabited Ogaden in southeastern Ethiopia experience regular security incidents. As a result, EPRDF forces appeared in the southern borderland in November 1991, five months after the collapse of the Derg. In the meantime, rival Somali and Oromo factions had established themselves in Moyale and lesser towns in the region (Markakis, 2011, pp. 330-331).

When the EPRDF arrived on the scene in the Ogaden area, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) had already begun building a presence and developing an allegiance within the newly created Somali regional state. At that time, since the greater Somalia ambition had been frustrated, ONLF started using as a strategic advantage the existing ethnic-based federation and won the majority of the Parliament. It was in June 1992 that the first regional election was conducted in Ethiopian Somali, formerly known as the Ogaden province (Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009, p. 47). The flag chosen by the Somali regional administration featured five pointed stars, which of course signifies the greater Somalia dream (Markakis, 2011, p. 308). The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) ruled the regional state until 1994, when they fell out with the Ethiopian federal state, which opposed their secessionist agenda.
ONLF was created in 1984 with the ambition of self-determination of the Ethiopian Somali area, and it was supported by the Somali state. After the 1989 agreement of the two states, it lost its support in Somali and turned its base to Ethiopia. Over the subsequent years, ONLF successfully employed the new political order to capitalize on the ethno-national politics of the newly federated Ethiopia. The ONLF achieved a dominant position in regional politics in the 1992 elections, when its co-founder was elected as the first regional president. Unlike other regions, where either EPRDF members or allies were the first regional authority, in the Somali region ONLF was not a member of the EPRDF coalition that formed the first regional authority. Above all, motivated by a secessionist agenda, the party refused the invitation to participate in the dialogue that eventually produced the transitional charter, resulting in its displacement by the Somali People’s Democratic League (SPDL) (Samatar, 2007, p. 1134).

In a sense, ONLF was not under the influence of the EPRDF, and its secessionist agenda was unacceptable even though the new condition of Article 39 legalized such a motion. Another referendum besides the one on Eritrea, however, would be a complete blow to the EPRDF, since the major criticism against them was that the federalism approach would eventually dismantle the nation like neighboring Somalia. Therefore, the victory of ONLF in principle should last only a few years if the EPRDF’s rule was to be consolidated. Thus, the request of ONLF through the regional Parliamentarians for a referendum on self-determination at the beginning of 1994 made it an immediate target. Ethiopian security forces chased the ONLF out of office. Controlling the region became less easy, since the three parties operating in the region promoted very different visions of Somali self-determination. The ONLF fought for an independent state dominated by the Ogaden clan. The Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL) supported the legal decentralization process in Ethiopia as a whole. The Western Somalia Democratic Party (WSDP), a new name for a transition from the previous WSLF, still pursued a pan-Somalia agenda (Simula & Arrous, 2009, p. 182). After that, the EPRDF replaced the void with a new party, the ESDL, which was dominated by non-Ogaden leaders (Hagmann, 2014, pp. 725-731). The EPRDF effectively controlled the leadership. In the periphery of Somalia, it was not only ONLF’s military operation that became a threat but also various Oromo liberation movements.

In 1992 due to a disagreement, the OLF left the Transitional State of Ethiopia, which at the time was the second most powerful political force in the nation. Afterward, it continued armed insurgency. The IFLO was also operating in the Somali region. The Somali region was a buffer from which these opposition parties attacked the Transitional State of Ethiopia (TGE). The choice of the Ogaden area as the base of operation for Oromo rebel movements had more reason than the fact that the topography made it difficult to enforce state control.
The EPRDF successfully, even though not willfully, controlled the Oromia region through OPDO. The next choice for Oromo liberation was obviously the Somali region. First, the region is a neighbor to Kenya, where most of the Oromo that oppose the state migrated. This means that recruiting fighters became relatively easier. Second, the region was probably the only area where the EPRDF did not have sufficient control. As a result, it could have a relatively safer operational base. Third, part of the Oromo liberation movement’s support derived from the fact that the region harbors clans whose ethnic origin is Oromo but who use the Somali language and cultural institutions to govern themselves.

The new ethnic arrangement resurrected the primordial view of ethnicity, so Somali clans whose origin was from Oromia needed redefinition. To the advantage of the Oromo liberation movement, these clans became targets of other Somali clients in the new federal arrangement. ONLF did not follow an incorporation strategy into Somali but rather clearly excluded them from its political arrangement. A very good example of such a proposition is that Somali clans of Oromo descent were not invited to the all-Somali reconciliation that was called by ONLF, which gained popularity in the region (Asnake, 2011, pp. 74-94). In such instances, Oromo liberation groups like the OLF and IFLO were pragmatic choices. Fourth, the region’s minority clans, especially the Isaaq and the Gadabursi, also felt marginalized in the predominance of Ogadeni in ONLF, and thus they supported anyone else (Montclos, 2005, p. 307).

6.3.5 Ethnic or Islamic agenda?

Did ONLF and IFLO have an Islamic agenda? One could not deny the existence of an Islamic agenda for ONLF, since its members were entirely Muslims and its formation history seems to imply so. Sheikh Ibrahim Abdallah, the founder, was not only a graduate of the Islamic University of Riyadh but also founded it in the Gulf. Indeed, part of the struggle constituted moving towards a more religious, pro-independence position. The replacement of Sheikh Ibrahim Abdallah in 1998 by a former admiral of the Somali navy, Muhammad Omar Osman, did not prevent the struggle for independence of the Ogaden from becoming “Islamicized” (Montclos, 2005, p. 306).

IFLO was an offshoot of the OLF (Markakis, 2011, p. 196). Sheikh Ibrahim Bilisa founded it in 1969. Latter in 1986, however, it was taken over by Abdulkarim Muhammad Ibrahim Hamed. In his exile in Saudi Arabia after 1978, he took a hard Islamist line, which then took precedence over nationalist claims. Sudan supported the IFLO (Bellucci & Zaccaria, 2009, p. 110). For some, however, the Islamic in its title is primarily opportunistic, and it proved a useful means of obtaining financial support from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. ONLF had no specific Islamist leaning, but at the time in the late 1990s it came to rely on AIAI for financial assistance (Waal, 2004, p. 205).
Given that all Somalis are Muslims, asking about an Islamic agenda might be irrelevant for ONLF. ONLF members are less likely to see a distinction, as Islam is the very core of their identity. What is clearer, however, is that its agenda was more about ethnicity than religion. This is evident in the fact that it did not welcome those Somali whose historic origin traced to Oromo even if they were also practicing Islam. Thus, their struggle centered on the idea of being an “authentic Somali” rather than being a Muslim. Discrediting IFLO’s Islamic agenda, however, is less tenable. The very objective and its support base being limited to Muslim Oromo inform us that the nature of the organization is a mixture of ethnicity with Islam. The prevalence of the latter is evident given the fact that IFLO attacked similar ethnic group liberation parties. In 1991, it launched ground attacks on the OLF (Montclos, 2005, p. 307).

In September 1991, the infighting between the OLF and IFLO was strong in the Dire Dawa/Harar area (Zitelmann, 1996, p. 109). However, its objective – independence for Muslim-populated areas of Oromia – failed to attract many supporters. IFLO did not gain much support from the Muslim population in Bale, where OLF supporters have a stronghold (Østebø, 2011, p. 292). In fact, it did not enjoy the popularity the OLF enjoyed among the Oromo people, due to its political principles, which are religious, and its regional tendencies (Asafa, 1998, p. 15).

Since 1998, thus, the EPRDF has placed a friendly Somali People’s Democratic Party (SPDP) in the regional state. The party is an alliance of non-Ogaden clans supported by the EPRDF. Consequently, the fate of the ONLF became to retreat into the bush to wage war against the state. The stability of SPDP as a regional party in power, however, did not bring to an end the prevailing “chronic political instability and violent conflicts” (Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009, p. 47).

As the above sections attempted to show, a security threat from Somalia is not new since the Somali region has always suffered some sort of instability. The OLF’s mid-1990s use of Somalia as a base of attack, however, gave it a renewed focus. Ethiopia’s subsequent efforts to build up Somali clients in border areas and its occasional incursion across the border ended the OLF activities there (K. J. Menkhaus, 2004, p. 55). As also indicated in the above section in the pre-1995 period itself, EPRDF security threats led to the deployment of federal forces in the area and the chasing away of the ONLF. What is new is the emergence of al-Ittihad al-Islamia (the unity of Islam), which has also allegedly been linked to Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda.

According to Menkhaus, quoted in Tabarani, AIAI is a militant Islamist group established around 1983 by young academics who had studied or worked in Saudi Arabia. Its financial support came from the Salafi/Wahhabi movement and its Saudi-based charity organizations. Its vision was to put an end the prevailing corruption and tribalism of the state. Political Islam thus has to be understood as an ideology that was chosen to fight for a national cause rather than a transnational
goal. To AIAI, the ultimate solution to the previously failed nationalism and divisive clanism attempt was Islam.

AIAI also resurrected the greater Somalia vision, an attempt to incorporate all Somalis into the present Somalia (Tabarani, 2011, p. 201). AIAI was also recruiting young Somalis for the jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (Pecastaing, 2011, p. 26). The five stars of Somalia’s flag represent the aim of unification of the Somali-inhabited regions of the Ogaden of Ethiopia, the British and Italian Somaliland, Djibouti, and the northern frontier district of Kenya. The Ethiopian state has always feared that a reunified Somalia would again advocate the greater Somalia dream. With the fall of the Somali state, the greater Somalia dream was frustrated.

The Ethiopian state had a vested interest in portraying AIAI as a terrorist-driven movement (Jhazbhay, 2008, p. 184). With the rise of AIAI, new concerns started to develop. First, the group managed to occupy Luuq, a border commercial city near to both Kenya and Ethiopia. Due to its geographic proximity, it became quite easy to realize the war it waged against the newly established Somalia region of Ethiopia. Second, the group also linked up with the rebel forces that against the Ethiopian state, namely ONLF and IFLO. The alliance with these groups increased the concern of the EPRDF. Third, the group managed to stage terrorist attacks targeting hotels. When it attempted to extend its vision of the Somali region’s independence, however, a military action was taken against it and a moderate faction of it was rejoined to the already existing political parties. The result was the creation of the Somali People League (SPL). Even though such actions gave stability to the Somali region, a periodic attack was made on Ethiopian soil between 1995 and 1996, for which Al-Ittihad al-Islamia claimed responsibility.

On July 8, 1996, also there was an attempt to assassinate the minister of transport and communication and the head of the recently formed Somali party. The attack targeted two hotels in Addis Ababa, the Ghion and Ras hotels, and one hotel in an eastern part of Ethiopia where Muslims are the majority. The state of Ethiopia decided that unless it decisively responded to the radical Islamist forces trained in southern Somalia, the nation’s stability would be endangered. It was within a month’s interval that an attack began in August 1996. The Ethiopian troops finally in 1996 crossed into Somalia to dislodge the Islamists. The insurgency raged on until 1998 (Pecastaing, 2011).

Even if at that time it seemed that the external Islamist threat from Somalia had abated finally, the newly installed Somali National Front (SNF) was not strong enough to fight the Islamists on its own. Its association with the Ethiopian state and the United States also worked against its favor, thereby causing it to lose legitimacy from the people (M. Getachew, 2009, p. 135). The bombing of two cities in Ethiopia by AIAI, when looked at in the historic context and events that unfolded after 1991 in the Ogaden region of Ethiopian Somali, were seen as terrorist threats from the neighboring countries and did not contribute towards negatively informing the EPRDF’s attitude towards Islam.
The linkage of AIAI with the Salafi/Wahhabi support of Saudi Arabia also likely informed the EPRDF to develop a negative attitude towards any religious import that has the Salafi/Wahhabi flavor.

6.3.6 The initial cordial relations with Sudan

TPLF had a very good relationship with the state of Sudan while it was fighting against the Derg. Sudan, along with others, provided a military base, medical facilities, and offices (Addis Getahun Solomon, 2007, p. 372). TPLF members were allowed to freely move across the border, establish a virtual embassy, provide relief for their refugees, and carry out a multitude of political and service activities among the refugees (Young, 1998, p. 44). After the failure of crops in 1984 and the strangling effect on the state intensified counterinsurgency strategies, Sudan became a destination for refugees. In the year 1984 alone, 189,000 crossed the border. For many years, Khartoum had provided aid and comfort to Islamic movements that sought to overthrow the Ethiopian state. It had permitted and encouraged the Muslim rebels of Eritrea to live and organize in Sudan (Burr & Collins, 2003, p. 25). The 1989 coup in Khartoum brought Hasan al-Turabi, the leader of the National Islamic Front (NIF), to power.

After the Mengistu regime was overthrown, relations between President Meles Zenawi and Sudan were at first friendly, for he had ended the Ethiopian sanctuary for the SPLA. In October 1991, the Ethiopia-Sudan Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation ended all of the Sudan People’s Liberation (SPLA) activity in Ethiopia (Burr & Collins, 2003, p. 54). Three joint ministerial conferences were convened, and agreements of cooperation and goodwill were signed in 1992 and 1993. Sudan and Ethiopia signed agreements of cooperation in 1992 and 1993. A joint committee was created to assess and propose a settlement of the long-standing border dispute between them, and both nations agreed to deny the use of their territory as a sanctuary for insurgents seeking to overthrow neighboring states. Ethiopian territory would not be used “to destabilize Sudan,” and Sudan would not permit Ethiopian rebels to use its territory as a safe haven (Burr & Collins, 2003, p. 178).

6.3.7 The deterioration of relations with Sudan

In the Horn of Africa Hasan al-Turabi was the patron of the Islamic Ogaden Union, which sought to overthrow the EPRDF (Burr & Collins, 2003, p. 74). The Ethiopian connection soon turned sour when Ethiopia began to consider major dam-building projects on the Blue Nile and Atbara rivers. Ethiopia joined with Uganda to demand the revision of the historic Nile Waters Agreement of 1959. In the agreement, Egypt and Sudan had divided the Nile waters among themselves. Relations
continued to deteriorate even more rapidly in 1994 when Khartoum began to provide assistance to the Ethiopian rebels of the OLF (Burr & Collins, 2003, p. 93).

An Osama bin Laden and al-Turabi partnership brought Islamic volunteers from neighboring countries, of which Ethiopia is one. Training was conducted in NIF camps. Upon completion of training, the trainees were sent back to their countries of origin. Ethiopia warned Sudan against exporting Islamic ideology to its neighbors and even stated that it would reopen Sudan People’s Liberation Army training camps in Ethiopia in retaliation (Erlich, 2010, pp. 123-124).

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the second incident that is discussed as evidence of a containment policy towards Islam is the assassination attempt of Hosni Mubarak. Responding to this also requires the provision of some details of events that surrounded it. In June 1995, President Mubarak arrived in Addis Ababa to attend the annual summit meeting of the OAU. On June 26, his limousine fell under fire by two gunmen from the Egyptian Jama’at al Islamia, whose base was in Khartoum. The two assassins died in the exchange of gunfire with Mubarak’s bodyguards. Three others were shot dead in their Addis Ababa hideout five days later. Three others were arrested, but three more escaped – Ethiopian security agents, including one gunman and two others whom the Ethiopian state claimed had planned the assassination in Khartoum (Burr & Collins, 2003, p. 189).

Later investigations revealed that the then state of Sudan was key in helping the assassination attempt. The Sudanese state refused to hand over those suspects who managed to pass through its territory. In response, the Ethiopian state’s relationship with the Sudanese state was seriously strained. Given the fact that no Ethiopian was involved in the incident and much of the help was from Sudan, there is no fear that developed in relation to it by the Ethiopian state towards its own Muslim population. However, the event had consequences for the Muslim population.

After the attempted assassination of Hosni Mubarak, Ethiopian President Meles Zenawi joined Museveni and Afewerki in outright opposition to the Sudanese state (Burr & Collins, 2003, p. 206). In December 1995, the UN Security Council demanded that Sudan extradite to Ethiopia the three missing gunmen in the attempted assassination of President Mubarak. The Sudan state responded that it had no proof that the suspects had entered its territory. In January 1996, the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution No. 1044 imposing sanctions on Sudan for refusing to cooperate in the assassination investigation. The United States accused Sudan of “complicity in supporting and sheltering” the terrorists (Burr & Collins, 2003, p. 207).

Related to the incident, not only did Ethiopia’s airline stop flying into Sudan, but also many of the Sudanese embassy employees were forced to leave the country. It was reported that about 100 employees within the country were forced to be reduced to four. Most of the employees were reported to be engaged in charitable organizations mainly building mosques and madrasahs, basically in the region of Somalia and Oromia (Clarke, 2010, p. 308). The effort is also considered part of the
strategy of the United States to isolate Sudan in order to combat the growing Islamic threat, and neighboring countries received substantial financial and military support packages in return for implementing the same policy (Derje & Schlee, 2009, p. 170).

6.3.8 Continued friendship with Ethiopian Muslims

The 1995 terrorist incident did not change much the EPRDF’s approach towards Muslims in the 1995-2001 periods. This period, however, is different in one sense. There were continual security threats from the neighboring countries, namely Somalia and Sudan. Thus, state policy towards Islam was to curtail Islamic extremism from the neighborhood countries. This stance, however, should not be confused with the EPRDF’s attitude towards its own Muslim population. The EPRDF’s attitude was still positive towards its Muslim population. In the period, however, the EIASC’s role as the primary national level representative of the Muslim communities increased.

The EIASC also increased its contact with Saudi Arabia, and both the governor of Mecca and the grand mufti visited Ethiopia. At the airport, the president and higher officials made a reception. The 1995-2001 periods of Ethiopian Muslims were also characterized as a period when Ethiopian Muslims increased their connection to their coreligionists outside Ethiopia, especially with Saudi Arabia. During this period, public visibility of Islam in Ethiopia increased as its connection with the global world also rose. The new relations enabled not only funds to construct religious physical facilities but also resources to disseminate the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. In this regard, short summer courses targeting youth were delivered both in the capital city and in the countryside where Muslims are dominant.

The result was a proliferation of Islamic madrasahs and mosques in which the imams’ orientation is Wahhabism. The finances of the Gulf States also helped in building mosques and madrasahs that espouse the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. In this period, Islamic financing was more private in nature and based on private contacts of individuals rather than under the EIASC. In fact, the EIASC also strengthened its contact with Saudi Arabia, as evidenced by the fact that the grand mufti of Mecca and the governor visited Addis Ababa. Related to it, even though there were some conflicts between the reform-oriented new teaching of Islam and the traditional Muslims of Ethiopia, the intra-religious relationship generally could be characterized as cordial.

It was early in the 2000s that religious radicalism became a point of discourse in Ethiopia. At this time, however, the state was reluctant to subscribe to a proposition that it was becoming firmly rooted in Ethiopia. Thus, at best it was framed as a threat from the neighboring nations, most specifically from Sudan and Somalia. Presently, however, religious extremism has surfaced in the political agenda of the EPRDF. In fact, religious extremism is one of the top priorities requiring attention. Understanding the discourse of religious extremism requires a debate in the area. In this
regard, it is first important to understand what the term connotes and how it is differentiated from similar terminologies.

A Saudi delegation also visited Addis Ababa for five days in the month of November 1998. The governor of Mecca and Medina led the official delegation. The overall purpose of the visit was to assess the conditions of Ethiopian Muslims. The delegation not only met the head of the EIASC, Sheik Abdurrahman Hussein, but also had talks with President Negaso Gidada. Governor Sheik Mohamed bin Abdallah al-Soubayel noted that the Ethiopian state had adopted measures to improve the condition of Muslim communities in Ethiopia. The religious motivation of the visit was more evident in the fact that the delegation sought ways to extend religious teaching for Ethiopian Muslims (Hearald, 1998).

6.3.9 Conclusion

The EPRDF’s perspective of the mid-1990s took a slight detour following the watershed incidents of 1995 and 1996. The new detour was from a friendly stance towards Islam to its consideration as a long-term threat. The concept of Islam, more specifically fundamentalist Islam, was not inward in its orientation. At that time, the principal external threats emanated from Somalia and Sudan. The threat was evident, given that there were high-profile attacks on Ethiopian soil. The assassination attempt of Abdul-Mejid Hussein and the bombings of the Ghion hotel in Addis Ababa and the Ras Hotel in Dire Dawa were evidence of the existing threat. The failed assassination attempt of Egypt’s president with the help of the state of Sudan was also additional evidence. In fact, Ethiopia engaged in a sustained military campaign against the Somalia-based AIAI.

The EPRDF’s assessment of the period reflected the reality of Islamic fundamentalism. For some, these terror incidents prodded the EPRDF’s policy towards Islam to lean towards the securitization of its own Muslim population. As this section attempted to show, the EPRDF’s primary perception of Islamic fundamentalism was as an external threat through the sponsorship of its neighboring countries. The section also argues that the EPRDF’s attitude towards Ethiopian Islam did not change. The continued friendly stances by the EPRDF are evident from the fact that the temporarily tense relations with its own Muslim population reverted to their pre-1995/96 state. In a way, however, the attacks added to a historic psyche of Ethiopians that any ideological import from outside disestablishes the nation. This section discussed Somalia in relation to the Ogaden area conflict with Somalia and Sudan in relation to the events surrounding the assassination attempt of Egypt’s president.

The section has put the issue of Somalia within its historic context and argued that its relation with Somalia hinges on three factors. These factors are the Somalia state’s attitude towards the greater Somalia dream, the possibility that the nation would continue to support anti-Ethiopian forces
that disturb the internal peace, and the fear that the nation might become a safe haven and conduit for terrorists and extremists. The section also looked at two parties operating in the Somali region, namely ONLF and IFLO. Notwithstanding their Islamic agenda, looking at the way the EPRDF dismantled their influence, its perception of them was along ethnic rather than religious lines. The section also discussed the assassination attempt on Hosni Mubarak. Given the fact that no Ethiopian was involved in the incident and much of the help was from Sudan, there is no fear that developed in relation to it by the state towards its own Muslim population. Of course, the event had consequences for the Muslim population since the assassination effort was followed by a halt in the diplomatic relations of the two countries and the closure of many Islamic NGOs working among Ethiopian Muslims. As the years 1998 to 2000 witnessed, however, Ethiopia resumed its cordial relationship with Sudan. This came about because an armed conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia required Addis Ababa and Sudan to reestablish their relations, and they have retained a good relationship ever since.
Chapter Seven: EPRDF Policy: Changes, Causes, Role, and Reaction (Post-2001)

The overall objective of this chapter is similar to the previous one. In the chapter, I present the Ethiopian state policy towards Islam in terms of policy changes, causes that drove the policy changes, and the role and reactions of the Muslim communities. Unlike the previous chapter, the focus is the post-2001 period. The post-2001 period starkly contrasts with the pre-2001 period. In the pre-2001 period, the Islamic fundamentalism threat of the Ethiopian state was mainly external, a perception notably directed towards neighboring Somalia and Sudan. The overall approach of the state, as a result, was that of actively seeking support from its own Muslim population.

The post-2001 approach of the state is different, even if not radically so. The continuity is that the state did not stop externalizing the principal threat of Islamic fundamentalism from Somalia and Sudan. In the post-2001 period, however, there was a progressively slow recognition that Islamic fundamentalism is not far off but rather establishing a stronghold amidst its own Muslim population. The reaction of the state towards this new perception was to contain it via the EIASC. Part of the state’s strategy was to side with the faction of the EIASC that was anti-Wahhabi. The official monopolization of the Islamic religious space by the EIASC, however, did not significantly affect the Islamic landscape. The reform-oriented Salafi-Wahhabi individuals and their network continued to have a stronghold among the Muslim population. Over the years, the state increasingly perceived traces of dissent within the Muslim communities as laced with the intent of subverting the constitution in order to establish an Islamic state or a state based on Islam.

In the following sections, I divide the post-2001 period into three brief periods defined by changes in the state’s policy. The first period (2001-2005) is characterized by the cleansing of the leadership of the EIASC from the influence of Wahhabism so that a moderate form of Islam remains normative of the Muslim communities in Ethiopia. The second period (2005-2008) witnessed an increasing level of intra-religious conflict, and the policy of the state was to promote interfaith dialogue and strengthen the legal framework. The approach of the state was to mobilize the official religious representatives to contain the increasing religious radicalism.

In the last period (2009-present), the policy of the state is that of domestication of Islam with the intent to preempt religious radicalism. In relation to the last period, I also closely look into the reactions of the Muslim community. In documenting the policy changes, the underlying factors are many and intricate. In the following sections, I argue that the growing level of intra-religious and interreligious conflicts played a significant role as the internal factor that shaped the perception of the state. The interpretative grid of Islamic fundamentalism as the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam solidified also as the state renewed its alliance in the US-led Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) following 9/11.
7.1 Cleansing the EIASC from Wahhabism Influence (2001-2005)

7.1.1 Background

Was there a change in the state’s policy after 2001? In the following sections, I argue positively. I also ask the nature of the change. Central to the policy change of the state is also a renewed relationship with the leadership of the EIASC. As the previous chapter (Chapter 6) outlined, the state strengthened its control over the EIASC beginning in 1995 with the intent to preempt similar violent incidents among the Muslim communities. The result was the monopolization of the EIASC as the formal official representative of Ethiopian Muslims.

Despite the EIASC’s preeminence as the official representative of the Muslim communities, it did not effectively control the religious landscape within the Muslim communities. There were developments among the Muslim communities that were beyond the administrative and intellectual grip of the EIASC. In fact, the leadership of the EIASC in its post-1995 period was divided between those who support the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and the Sufi, who oppose such interpretations. The early years of the post-2001 period witnessed an increased intra-religious tension among the Muslim community that practiced traditional Islam and newly emerging intolerant Salafi-Wahhabi-oriented youth.

I look at the internal power struggle among the leadership of the EICA and the way the state sided with the faction that was against Wahhabism (7.1.2). I also argue that the siding of the state with the Sufi-oriented faction of the EICA related to the new role assigned to Ethiopia in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) (7.1.3). I also view the intra-religious conflicts and interreligious conflicts as a significant factor shaping the attitude of the state (7.1.4). I also show that in this period the state started to emphasize Islamic radicalism in its relation to the West, as evident in its foreign policy document (7.1.5). In the final sub-section (7.1.6), I argue that despite the shortfalls, Muslim activists sided with the EPRDF in the 2005 controversial election (7.1.7). The overall hypothesis I present is that the state approach towards Ethiopian Muslims is to cleanse the leadership of the EIASC from the influence of Wahhabism, which the state construes as an expression of radical Islam.

7.1.2 Internal power struggle

The post-2001 period witnessed another change in the state’s policy to strengthen the effective control of the EIASC to contain the mounting religious fundamentalism and extremism. In this period, the state not only supported the power monopoly of the EIASC but also created an interest in its composition. In the pre-2001 period, the concern of the EPRDF in relation to the religious sector was to keep religious activism under its control, making it subservient to its ethno-linguistic-based political program. As a result, merely supporting the ethno-linguistic political program of the EPRDF
was enough to gain support from the state. The result was that the EIASC remained a competitive space for various interpretations of Islam, including Salafi-Wahhabi adherents. The events after 2001 indicate that the state made a significant turn in its policy direction, with the state actively participating in the internal politics of the EIASC.

The state joined the power struggle between the members of the EIASC leadership who are supporting the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and those opposing it. In the internal power struggle, the state stood against the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam on the perception that the interpretation is against a religiously tolerant culture. Following the new directions, the state purged the leadership from the Wahhabi influence starting in 2004. The new allegiance of the state with Sufi-inclined members of the EIASC made strongly opposing the Salafi/Wahhabi interpretation of Islam to be a normative expectation for leadership aspirants. Such a policy direction should not imply that the state started to control the daily mundane operations of the EIASC, but rather that it supported a faction of the EIASC leadership that it perceived as religiously tolerant and espousing no interest in politics.

The co-option of the Sufi-oriented faction of the EIASC was ineffective, given that the strategy hinged on monocentric understanding of societal norms among Ethiopian Muslims. With the reform movements and global connections, the actual interaction within the Muslim communities in Ethiopia had already become polycentric and there were several normative “mainstreams.” The Muslim communities’ diversity has increased to such an extent that there are new “mainstreams” that question the EIASC as the sole source of religious authority and celebrate the emergence of reform movements and influential individual religious figures. With the monocentric perception of the state, the state’s policy directions failed to be both polycentric and inclusive. The approach of the state in a way ruled out the possibility that the two interpretations would learn to live with each other and take into account that the other is a recognized participant in the representation of the Muslim communities.

This new direction, the installation of anti-Wahhabi members in the leadership of the EIASC, was a result of myriad local, regional, and global developments in relation to Islamic fundamentalism. In the following section, I will explore the changes in terms of the GWOT and the spread of Saudi Arabian-influenced fundamentalist Islam in Ethiopia. I also look into the intra-religious conflicts among Muslims to show that they informed the state’s perception of Wahhabism. The 2005 pre-election enthusiasm of the opposition parties and the allegiance of Muslim-dominated regions towards the EPRDF are also of interest. The conjoining of Ethiopian Muslim activists with the EPRDF in the campaign of the 2005 election also shows that the cordial relationship with Islam continued throughout the period. The post-2005 election period witnessed the issuance of various proclamations that constrain the political space and the role of civic societies. I will also evaluate the
claims of Muslim activists that some of the post-election period’s controversial laws effectively targeted Muslims and Islam in light of the 2005 elections.

7.1.3 Ethiopia’s new role in the Global War on Terrorism

The United States’ relationship with the EPRDF was very strong since the 1990s. The US pressured the 1990 London conference that played a significant role in facilitating the transition that brought the EPRDF to power. The alliance also continued in the 1990s as Sudan harbored Islamic fundamentalism, endangering the US interest in the region. The US government also supported the Ethiopian attack on al-Ittihad. The post-2001 alliance between the US and Ethiopia, thus, is not as such new but rather a renewed one. The GWOT assigned a renewed role to Ethiopia. In the post-2001 renewed alliance, Ethiopia’s position became that of an anchor state in the troubled region of the Horn of Africa and a closer ally to the US. The new alliance had an effect in forming the perceptions of Islamic fundamentalism and extremism both in the Horn of Africa and throughout Ethiopia.

The US negative perception towards Wahhabism, both as an exporter of radical ideology and a disestablishing force of social cohesion, was not without effect in informing the EPRDF’s perspective. It seems that the state uncritically followed the assessment of the US in defining the nature of Islamic fundamentalism and extremism. The negative perception of the US towards Wahhabism informed the EPRDF’s perspective towards reformist attempts among Ethiopian Muslims. The EPRDF’s categorization of Wahhabism as a disestablishing force, however, was not exclusively a byproduct of the new alliance with the US. The post-2001 period also witnessed both intra-religious and interreligious clashes.

In the post-2001 period, reform movements with Salafi/Wahhabi orientations secured a strong base among the Muslim population, especially in the Oromia regions. The reformist role in the Muslim communities increased as the reform-oriented young scholars trained in Islamic universities increasingly replaced the previous sheiks and built new mosques and Islamic schools. Some succeeded in gaining representation at various leadership levels of the EIASC. This does not mean, however, that their reform efforts were without resistance. With these puritan Islamic reform movements, the fate of most Sufi tombs and traditional mosques became desecration. In fact, such actions led to the division among the leadership of the EIASC into strong pro-Wahhabi interpreters and pro-Sufi.

These new reform movements within Ethiopian Muslims also contributed to the interreligious rivalry and strict identity boundary demarcation. The result was a strained relationship with Christian neighbors. The religious polemics between EOTC adherents and Muslims also started to mount in negative directions. The reform movement ambition also progressively increased to control the
EIASC leadership. The response from the state was to join the anti-Wahhabi factions of the EIASC and cleanse the leadership from the influence of the Wahhabi form of interpretation of Islam.

The period also witnessed the beginning of tightened control over Islamic NGOs that were suspected of promoting an extremist religious ideology. In 2004, the Ethiopian branch of the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHIF) was one of the 11 Islamic NGOs designated by the United States and Saudi Arabia as front organizations for terrorist activities. As of 2000, the Ethiopian branch alone had completed the construction of 16 mosques and was planning to fund 259 more by 2004 (Shinn, 2005, p. 99). This Islamic charity is one of the Saudi Arabia’s most active charities in the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, funding Wahhabi missionaries around the world and concentrating on establishing new mosques (Giraldo & Trinkunas, 2007, p. 121). The relationship between the EIASC and the Saudi-based Muslim World League (MWL) was also not that strained before the 2004 purging effort of the anti-Wahhabi factions in the leadership of the EIASC.

The state also started to control the import of religious radicalism, finances from the Gulf States, and radical Islamic religious literature. The 2002 US report on patterns of global terrorism (2003b, p. 4) praises Ethiopia, saying, “The Ethiopian Central Bank has been prompt in complying with US requests for name checks and asset freezes as part of the effort to curb terrorist financing.” Checking finances from the Gulf was not that easy since most of the funding is of a private nature. At customs through the role of the EIASC, Islamic works of literature that espouse an extremist version of Islam were controlled. There were reports that some literature was banned from distribution due to the extremist religious ideology it promoted.

It is also during this very period that various travel agencies from Saudi Arabia, suspected of promoting an intolerant version of Islam, multiplied. Intolerant preachers also emerged beyond the reaches of EIASC leadership. The global connections of the nation with the outside world made such externally enforced control mechanisms ineffective. Due to Internet connectivity and the possibility that some could travel to and from the Middle East, the influences continued. With such developments, criticism against EIASC leadership also abounded.

One might ask why it is that the support of Saudi Arabia increased after September 11, 2001. Khaled Abou El Fadl’s (2014, pp. 215-216) suggestion seems probable. He argues that the terrorist incident on US soil shattered the near absolute immunity of Wahhabism from criticism or exposure. After the event, Wahhabism and its role came under scrutiny from the media. The Saudis, however, were unwilling to allow Wahhabism as an ideology to lose its footing. Thus, Saudi Arabia looked to other than the West to build its theological empire. The result was, then, the rededication of resources so that Wahhabism can reassert its former influence in the Muslim world. Ethiopia was one of the countries targeted.
In this period, the state also embarked on an extensive decentralization process. The second phase of Civil Service Reform, which began in 1998 but lagged due to the Ethiopian-Eritrean war and the division with TPLF and EPRDF senior leadership, began implementation. In the year 2002, after the dust of the division in EPRDF politics settled, the reform implementation intensified. The new decentralization bypassed regional political organizations and delegated many responsibilities to counties (called woredas). The implication of such actions is profound, as the rural political system is organized in such a way that ethnicity and localities held more importance in local governance.

For Muslim-dominated areas, the implication is the empowerment of local leadership who sympathizes with their own communities and looks passively upon the infringement of religious rights of the other. In the newly devolved structures, the remarriage of Islamic reform movements with ethnicity has in a way contributed to their expansion. The remarriage of Islamic reform with ethnicity also deterred the possibilities of networking with similar movements in other areas. The implication is that the orientations of the reform movements were local and strongly intertwined with ethnicity. It is during this period that the term Wahhabi started to gain prominence, although the term has a prerogative sense, especially among the elderly.

Owing to the fact that Wahhabism has taken center stage in public discussion, I should ask how various actors conceive it. Among the general Muslim population, the term somehow refers to a fundamentalist reform movement that is recent in its origin and from Saudi Arabia. The general perception of the public was that the movement has strong financial backing from Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States. The equivalent of Wahhabist was “Muslim Pente.” The term Pente was a label assigned to Pentecostal-oriented evangelical Christians who zealously attempt to proselytize the EOTC adherents and do not have much respect for the local culture. In a way, the label indicates that Wahhabi is also inward-oriented and their attempt is to purge the popular Islam into the image of its prestigious origin, devoid of local cultural influences.

The label Wahhabism also connotes a perception that foreigners back it up and it is not local in origin and thus somehow detestable and inauthentic. It also implies pursuing religious fundamentalism divorced of traditions inherited from ancestors. Thus, a destabilizing force mainly attracts the youth, signifying immaturity. What Desplat (2013, p. 169) remarks of Wahhabi in Harar also applies to other areas: “Wahhabi became a pejorative term to denounce a wrong interpretation of Islam, the connection to the Saudi regime including the inflow of (imagined) resources, and, therefore, an ethical and moral decay.” The other contrasting image of Wahhabism was from the youth side. To the youth, Wahhabism was a correct interpretation of Islam that purges the influence of local cultures from the religion. It is following the path of the first three generations.

The marks of Ethiopian Wahhabism of the period thus did not deviate much from Khaled Abou El Fadl’s description of the definitive marks of Wahhabism. Looking at Abou El Fadl’s work is also
important in the Ethiopian context. The reason is that the US embassy of Ethiopia, although unsuccessfully, attempted to translate it into Amharic, Oromia, and Somali and distribute it among Ethiopian Muslims. The titles of the books are *The place of tolerance in Islam* and *The great theft*. According to WikiLeaks cables (2008a), the purpose of the translation was to curb intellectually the presumed religious extremism that was progressively taking root among the rural Ethiopian youth.

Abou El Fadl suggests a few marks as definite characteristics of Wahhabism as a reform movement. In his depiction, despite the negative image of the West, Wahhabism is a reform movement that targets and reserves the worst of its ire for fellow Muslims. First, it attacks sacred sites revered by the Muslim communities, engaging notably in the desecration of Sufi shrines and mausoleums. Second, its stance towards Muslim women is patriarchic and exclusionary. In other words, with the expansion of Wahhabism, women practically disappear from public life and their empowerments, as well as their political and social rights, are sharply eroded. Third, its theological paradigms are anti-rationalism, rejection of the doctrine of intercession, hostility to mysticism, reliance on the isolated hadith in the deduction of laws, prohibition of music, and an emphasis on ritualism. Fourth, the concern over “pedantic doctrines,” such as whether men and women may shake hands or not, gets a new focus (El Fadl, 2014, pp. 215-226).

The above-mentioned Wahhabism marks are also evident in Ethiopia. It was the desecration of Sufi tombs and traditional mosques frequented by followers of Islam that eventually led to the voting out of Wahhabi-oriented executive members of the EIASC and their replacement with strong anti-Wahhabists (Shinn, 2005, p. 97). The position of women among the Wahhabi-oriented interpreters, however, is more complex. The general stance has been to require Muslim women to wear hijab/niqāb as a sign of modesty and advocating that women should not mingle publicly with non-related men as a preemptive measure for sexual immorality. Some interpreters require the will of the wife to be subservient to the will of the husband. An Islamic blog (2016) states, “A woman should not leave a house without securing permission from her husband. If she does leave without his permission, it becomes *haram* upon her. Even if the purpose of her visit is to console the bereaved, to visit the sick or her families, she should not leave the house without the permission of her husband.”

Muslim activist preachers that follow the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam with secular education backgrounds tend to paint women’s role in Islam in a more positive light. Their emphasis has been those stories in the Hadith that speak positively about women. The story of Aisha in the Hadith serves as a model in guiding the life of modern women. The image of Aisha is as a poet, a religious scholar, and a medical professional. In discussing the role of women, it is very common to contrast the status of women in Islam with Christianity and to reason that the earlier has a better provision in terms of women’s rights over the latter. In describing the marital relationship, the emphasis has been that men should care about their women and their rights (BS, 2011).
In line with Abou El Fadl’s suggestion, followers of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam tend to be literalists in the interpretation of the Quran and generally avoid theological controversies beyond literal interpretations of the Quran and the Hadith as futile. All of them reject the supplication for the dead, show hostility to mysticism, rely on the isolated hadith in the deduction of laws, prohibit music, and emphasize ritualism. In one of the Amharic blogs (2014), it is said that “in another hadith it is written that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, ‘I will not shake hands with women.’ Even if the person would claim to have a holy purpose and pure heart he has to refrain from shaking hands with unrelated women.” I have personally noted many Muslims men with Salafi-Wahhabi orientations who are unwilling to shake hands with unrelated women. In addition, some do not take this provision that seriously but still follow the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation.

In a way, the description given for Wahhabism mostly fits with the Ethiopian reality. In this regard, one could note the Islamic publications of this time. Indeed, like their counterparts in the other world, the depiction of the West is that of immoral and more the friend of the enemy of Islam and Muslims, Israel. The newspapers nurture a narrative that the Israeli are the enemies of Islam. To illustrate this, I will discuss a news item in one of the Islamic papers. The Islamic paper reported that Israel is producing and selling a belt with a cheap price with the intent of causing infertility among the Muslim population. Most of the reform activities, with the exception of polemics and apologist works that target Christians, are also about expounding the meaning and the implication of tawhid (to proclaim God as one) as Islamic doctrine.

According to the 2002 International Religious Freedom Report (IRFR), between the years 2000 and 2002 the EIASC reported that 100 mosques burned. The main suspects were those influenced by the teachings of Wahhabism. Related to these incidents, in 2002 executive members of the Oromia branch of the EIASC were removed from their positions for not stopping the destruction of mosques in the region. One should ask two important questions. First, why was the action delayed 3 years? The probable answer is because the state did not feel the threat of Wahhabism as an ideology and the concept was merely zealous religious reform. Secondly, why did the state choose 2002 for its action? It is likely because of the new alliance with the US that counts Wahhabism as a disestablishing force. The limitation of measures against EIASC members also indicates that the EPRDF had a perception that the Wahhabism footing would not be that strong in the Muslim communities if not for the support of the leadership.
7.1.4 Intra-religious and interreligious conflicts

Do the characteristics of Wahhabism set forth by Abou El Fadl coincide with characteristics of Wahhabism in Ethiopia? As stated above, various mosques whose imams displayed Sufi orientations were targets for attack. The popular Islamic preaching circulating among the Muslim communities and related developments in the public arena provide further similarities. The strict interpretation of the doctrine of tawhid also earned popularity. Some of the preachers insisted on an unshaven beard and shortened trousers for men, and the wearing of niqāb that covers the whole body of the woman. The interpretation of such religious symbols among some Muslims and most Christians was a sign of radicalism and cultural imperialism.

In social relations, it also became increasingly visible. Some women and men refuse to shake hands with women unless the woman is wearing gloves. The mixing of opposite sexes also declined. The public visibility of women was highly discouraged, and strict Hadith teachings that reduce guiding women’s actions and behavior became more accepted. The Question and Answer sections of existing Islamic papers Islamic newspapers also indicated the new concerns. Most of the questions fell, in the words of Abou El Fadl, within “pedantic doctrine.” The appropriateness of celebrating the prophet Muhammad’s birthday also became a contentious point that divided those with Wahhabi orientations from the other Muslim communities.

The IRFR of the period also provides an insight into interreligious conflicts (USDOS, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2004, 2005a). The 5-year reports do have discernible patterns. During the 2001-2005 period, the Ethiopian Catholic Church (ECC) was not part of any conflict, mainly because ECC presence was limited in Muslim-dominated rural areas and neither the church nor their members actively engage in the proselytizing efforts. The ECC has rather played a reconciliatory role whenever religiously motivated incidents took place. During the period, there was not much conflict between Muslims and evangelical Christians. Contrary to the ECC, evangelicals target others for religious conversion but mainly EOTC adherents in their proselytizing efforts. Evangelicals, with the exception of mission agencies specializing in Muslim outreach, generally feel inadequate to target Muslims. This, however, does not explain the absence of conflict between Muslims and evangelicals.

In rural areas of the Oromia region where the conflicts mostly took place, evangelicals and EOTC adherents’ ethnicity is different. Mostly, evangelicals are local in origin and share the same ethnicity with Muslims, while adherents of the EOTC are from different ethnicities. Even those who are of local origin are associated with Amhara, based on the language they speak and their religious allegiances. In Muslim-dominated areas, then, the new ethnicity discourse also fused religions. In the discourse, thus, the Amhara were not welcomed, being considered as historic oppressors. Evangelical adherents, however, are mostly of the same ethnicity and therefore were not the primary targets of the attacks. This by itself would imply that the religious radicalism that began to develop was mixed
with ethnic rivalry, and the latter dominated over the others. This pattern, however, changes in the next period, since the attacks became indiscriminate of ethnicity, indicating that the religious dimension is gaining more ground and transcending ethnic allegiances.

In all of the conflicts with EOTC adherents, evangelicals were victims. There were cases where organized mobs beat to death evangelical believers. The systematic organization of the mob was evident from the fact that evangelical members knew about it in advance and provided prior notice to the police hoping for protection of the law. Unfortunately, however, the prior notifications did not spare the members from violent attacks. The attacks were not limited to religious gatherings but took place when evangelical adherents were at private homes and church compounds. On occasion, the mob dismantled congregations, even if the construction was upon state-allotted land. In all of the cases, evangelicals were a minority. Part of their rejection came from their zeal to evangelize, especially those who are from an EOTC background.

EOTC adherents have also clashed with Muslims. The clashes have two distinct patterns based on geography. In the capital city, all the conflicts were related to the construction of mosques. The quarrels started on two grounds. The first ground related to the intent to construct new mosques. What happened is either the new mosque was very near to an existing church or it was on a land previously used for the public celebration of EOTC public holidays. The other cause of controversies was that Muslims tended to build mosques overnight without securing the necessary permit from state authorities. Outside Addis Ababa, however, all of the clashes correlated with public religious celebrations of EOTC adherents. More specifically, they happened in areas where Muslims are the majority and the Christian holiday is Epiphany.

Epiphany is celebrated on January 19 (or 20 in leap year), or Tir 11 of the Ethiopian calendar. It is a colorful occasion that draws not only its adherents but also others. In the celebration, the tabot (the model Ark of the Covenant) is brought out of the temple and displayed publicly. The Ethiopian flag is also at the very center of the celebration, symbolizing the role of the church in building the nation. Historically, it was a moment revered by both Ethiopian Muslims and Christians. Even those who do not observe the holiday with religious devotion enjoy its cultural significance. With the new reform teaching, however, involvement in the moment has become an expression of the greatest of sins, the association of God with human-made objects. Thus, for Muslims attracted to the Wahhabi form of interpretation, it is a detestable moment that no one should associate. Increasingly, thus, it has become a reminder that the Christians and the Muslims have nothing in common.

The reports also indicated that there were complaints against public schools. During this period, it became very customary to hear reports that some teachers did not permit Muslim students to cover their heads within school compounds. In fact, at that time, there was no law that specifically prohibited the covering of heads within the schools. There seems to have been a general implicit
consensus that wearing hijab (headscarf) was not legal since the constitution requires education to be secular.

The issue increasingly became a concern, even though the wearing of hijab was not that popular among Ethiopian Muslims, especially children. Understanding hijab as an obligatory requirement for Muslims created a drift not only between Christians and Muslims but also within the Muslim communities. EIASC members were in general of the opinion that the requirement is not a mandatory religious precept but rather a reflection of Arab culture. Besides culture, they also reasoned on the economic ground that many could not afford it. Consequently, they did not respond positively to the practice but rather were reluctant. The result has been that some members of the Muslim communities over time have developed a grudging sense that EIASC members are not siding with “true Islam.”

The period is not only characterized by an intensification of interreligious rivalry, especially among those who have Wahhabi and Sufi orientations. There were also reports that the influence of Wahhabi was continually on the rise through the support of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States. Much of the evidence provided, however, is circumstantial. As a reference, it is usually pointed out that not only are the numbers of new mosques built increasing, but also looking at them one can easily tell that the mosques could not be built only with resources from the neighborhood. Indeed, the quality of the mosques by far exceeds the financial capabilities of the local Muslims. It is also common knowledge among Muslims that the construction of mosques is financed from the Gulf States. EIASC leaders on various occasions have pointed out that the financing organizations are foreign sources that espouse religious extremism.

The interreligious rivalry also had polemic dimensions. It was in this period that the ultra-conservative Mehabire Kidusan, which means the association of the saints, of the EOTC, started taking a very critical stance towards criticism against Christianity. In reaction to the strong criticism of Muslim polemists, it incorporated comparative religious materials within its Sunday school to refute Muslim polemists and apologists. Besides various preachings that targeted Islam, the association also devoted its 2001 special edition written by Atnathewos in Hamer magazine to deal specifically with Islam in a very polemical fashion (Atnathewos, 2001). A response was made by Hasen Taju (2002), a young Muslim Ustaz that was gaining prominence both in his preaching, publications, and translations. His rebuttal followed a similar offensive line of reasoning like Mehabire Kidusan. In a way, the increasing polemics and apologist papers inspired many.

There were also Muslims who organized themselves as debate teams and boldly visited prominent Christian personalities and even church compounds. Those public debates were released to the public to show the supremacy of one religion over the other. In a very religious culture, the call for debate is considered as a provocation. The overall affair did not show any sensitivity towards
other religions. Individuals from both sides also considered themselves instant experts after reading or watching similar debates. In a way, such interactions eroded a long-held respect between the two religions’ adherents and fueled suspicion among the two religions’ followers. It was also within this period that rumors that Ethiopian Muslims are working hard to Islamize Ethiopia within the coming 40 years started circulating among the Ethiopian population, feeding suspicion. Even if it is difficult to assess the direct impacts of such approaches, no one can discount the negative role they played in delimiting a sharp boundary between religious adherents as well as nurturing a sense of distrust for the others. One could easily note that both camps were highly influenced by uncritical materials that are available at their fingertips via Internet connectivity. The views expressed in these Internet sources were simplistic and shallow.

The intra-religious accusations reached a climax when former senior officials of the EIASC reportedly wrote an open letter to the prime minister. At that point, according to The Reporter, a weekly Amharic newspaper, on December 29, 2003, the overall aim of Wahhabism moved in the direction of controlling EIASC leadership. In the letter, members of the leadership complained that 4 million Riyals were secured from Saudi Arabia so that in the next election the upper hand would be secured by EIASC members with Wahhabi inclinations (Reporter, 2003). Following the report, the January 2004 election purged from its leadership those who had a Wahhabism interpretation. In order to make sure that it was free of their influence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials attended the election process. The deposition of the earlier executive members was reportedly based on corruption charges. Besides such developments within the nation, there were also developments in relation to the new alliance forged with the United States.

7.1.5 Foreign policy: Islamic radicalism

David Shinn (2002, p. 1), a former (US) ambassador to Ethiopia, delineates September 11, 2001, as an important mark for the nation in relation to Islamic fundamentalist threats. In his assessment, the Islamic fundamentalism threat did not increase from the previous periods. What did change, however, was a renewed interest by the US in Ethiopia in relation to the GWOT and the positive role it could play. The interest of the US in Ethiopia was not devoid of its context; it was just part of a growing US interest in Africa. The wake of September 2001 brought Africa from the periphery to the forefront in the discussion of global terrorism. With a renewed focus on the continent’s unsettled balance sheets, the West deemed Africa particularly vulnerable. Given the recent attacks on its soil, the unabated poverty, the lag in democratic practices, and religious and ethnic intolerance, this classification as fertile grounds is not a surprise.

Common sense coupled with the impressions of Africa’s leaders that the primary cause of Africa’s vulnerability lies in its poverty have painted a gloomier picture of Africa as a future
battleground for terrorism (Davis, 2010b, p. 136). The poverty–terrorism nexus turned the impoverished Africa into a fault line for many terrorists. Besides poverty, the clashes of civilization thesis, the negative correlation of terrorism with democratic peace, and the instability of the regimes as factors that terrorists could harness to their advantage were added as evidence to the vulnerability verdict (Cox, Falconer, & Stackhouse, 2010, pp. 26-39). The US was particularly concerned about states with a large Muslim population in Africa, despite the fact that the key terrorist threats in Africa have come from areas where African states adjoin the Arab world (Mills, 2007, p. 20). Thus, the existence of a significant Muslim population also contributed to the renewed attention of the US in relation with the GWOT.

According to Davis (2010a, p. 1), the terrorism threat of East Africa surpasses that of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This is obviously due to its history, as the region has been a hotspot of conflict and quite turbulent (Ploch, 2010, p. 46). The susceptibility or weakness of East Africa is linked to, among other factors, its expansive ungoverned spaces, porous borders, and geographical proximity to the Arabian peninsula, the state’s complicity in terrorist activities, pervasive corruption among border guards, and the ease of bribing low-level officials, to name a few (Chau, 2008; Davis, 2010b, pp. 135-138; Spencer, 2007, p. 38). “Many academic and Western intelligence sources agree that the growth of Islamic militant networks in East Africa is facilitated and promulgated by a shared sense of transnational Islamic identity that stems from long-established historical, cultural, linguistic and trade ties to the Arab world” (Haynes, 2007, p. 322).

Clearly, there are also social, cultural, and economic connecting dots that link the Horn of Africa to the Middle East and increase the suspicion. Given that much of international terrorism is linked to the troubles in the Persian Gulf, one would fear that the Horn might be the back door (Shinn, 2005, p. 94). Thus, in the American-led GWOT, the Horn of Africa emerged as strategic vis-à-vis the current conflict against Islamic extremists. What is the implication of this for Ethiopia?

The invitation of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi by George W. Bush in late 2002 to discuss terrorism indicated that Ethiopia is considered as an ally (Shinn, 2005, p. 111). Both the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) and the East Africa Regional Strategic Initiative (EARSi), programs of the US designed to build counterterrorism capabilities, made Ethiopia an ally in 2002 and 2003, respectively (Ploch, 2010, pp. 23-28). The payoff of the alliance is quite significant. Besides the political legitimacy the EPRDF gets from cooperation, the financial benefits cannot be underestimated.

Between 2002 to 2005, the assistance Ethiopia received from the US amounted to $23.475 million in terms of foreign military financing, international military education and training, and economic aid (Belachew, 2009, pp. 210-211). Besides the military support, the US sharply ramped up its food aid and development support. The annual average budget of US food assistance
dramatically increased. The budget was $147 million in the 1991 to 2001 period but it increased to $349 million from 2002 to 2005. The US was also heavily criticized for moderating its criticism of the human rights performance of the regime (Himmelgreen & Romero-Daza, 2010, p. 104).

The choice of Ethiopia as a strategic partner in the war on terrorism hinges on Ethiopia’s relative strength over its neighbors. Somalia had already become a failed state. Sudan was the only country in Africa that was pursuing Islam as a state ideology and also having an internal civil war (Himmelgreen & Romero-Daza, 2010, p. 104). In comparison to Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, Ethiopia’s security apparatus is more effective and less prone to terrorism (Shinn, 2005, p. 110). The size of its army and its unwavering support and active counterterrorism role also added to its favor (Ploch, 2010, p. 47). Its weak spots were linked with the fact that the country has many Muslims and myriad economic, political, and social issues that terrorists could take advantage of (Shinn, 2005, p. 114). Most of all, with the exception of the socialist regime, Ethiopia has been favored by the US consistently. During the 1960s, a pro-Ethiopia policy bias emerged at the State Department’s Africa Bureau (AF). The Cold War policy recognized Ethiopia as an important factor in the Horn of Africa due to its geostrategic location. Most significantly AF’s “Ethiopia imperative” survived the end of the Cold War and still plays a major role in shaping American policy in the region (Lafebvre, 2012, p. 705).

The 2004 country report of the United States (2005b, p. 30) praises the support of Ethiopia towards the global war on terrorism as “consistently solid and unwavering.” The report cites as examples of cooperation the nation’s role in actively investigating local and transnational terrorism activities in the Ogaden area, sharing information, engaging in increased military efforts to control its lengthy and porous border with Somalia, drafting an anti-terrorism law that criminalizes terrorism-related activities, improving security at its international airport, and introducing more secure passports that include anti-tampering features.

Since the onset of the war on terrorism, however, Somalia has come under intensive scrutiny as a potential safe haven for terrorist networks. Its Islamic movement, AIAI, has been the focus of attention for possible links with Al-Qaeda (K. J. Menkhaus, 2004, p. 49). Arab caucuses were proponents of a “united Somalia” as a bulwark against Ethiopia. They were led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which were the main backers. Ethiopia has a stake that encourages a federalist resolution of conflict throughout the Somali region, as a safeguard against any future resurgence of Somali irredentism. “Egypt on the contrary had a stake in a Somali unitary state throughout the entire expanse of the Somali coast, including Somaliland, as a bulwark against Ethiopia and any possibility that Addis Ababa might disrupt Egypt’s access to Nile waters” (Jhazbhay, 2009, p. 12). The result was that Ethiopia did not recognize the transitional national state but rather supported the opposition parties.
The Ethiopian foreign policy document emphasizes that with relation to the neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa, protection of national interest and security are the two lenses that govern the relations (MoI, 2002). In an economic sense, it is set up so that the nations are not much of a source for investment inflows, trade, and development finance. The primary benefit the country could draw relates to port service, since Ethiopia is a landlocked country. The foreign policy document, however, clearly indicates that the potential damage these countries could cause in Ethiopia is tremendous. Such damage assessment is done in terms of a security lens, mainly religious extremism. The religious extremism stems from two sources, the promotion of religious extremism and provision of territory for religious extremists. The materialization of these two cornerstones endangers the separation of religion and religious tolerance.

A narrow ethnic sentiment is another potential threat. The document notes that the greater Somalia dream is no longer a threat to Ethiopia due to its disintegration; the nation is depicted as a haven of religious extremism. Related to this, the image of Ethiopia was also damaged, since the image invokes an area of conflict. In expounding upon Ethiopia’s relations with neighboring countries, much of the discussion was about Sudan and Somalia. One of the principles through which relations, in general, are valued is in light of the prevailing democracy. It is asserted that it is only through the proper implementation of a democratic system that members of various groups, including religion, could live in an atmosphere of tolerance, and their absence creates division and intensifies conflicts.

Given that democracy in the African states is in its infancy, what outweighs it is the possibility of these states promoting religious extremism or providing their territory for religious extremism. Among the members of the African Union, the foreign policy document (2002) singled out Somalia and Sudan. In assessing the historic background with Somalia, the “Greater Somalia” dream is at the center of the analysis as an expansionist policy that incited hostility towards Ethiopia. To realize a unified Somalia, not only did the nation war against Ethiopia, but also it also always allied with all groups and countries that it perceived were anti-Ethiopian and that had disturbed Ethiopia’s peace. Locally also, the effort won support from a considerable number of Ethiopian Somalis. This mobilization effort succeeded because Ethiopian Somalis were resisting the prevailing local repressive systems.

Such a threat from the outside, deriving from the greater Somalia dream, is believed to be dead since the nation now is stateless. Internally also, the attraction of Ethiopian Somalis to the ideology faded away as their rights were constitutionally guaranteed in a newly defined inclusive Ethiopian identity. With Somalia’s disintegration, however, a new threat has emerged. The nation has fallen under the grip of ever-growing religious extremism. It has become a safe haven and conduit for terrorists and extremists and thereby a threat to Ethiopia’s peace and stability. For its own sake,
therefore, Ethiopia works in cooperation with the Somali people to realize peace and democracy in the nation so that stability would abound also in the region.

The relationship of Ethiopia and Sudan stretches into antiquity, to the relations between the ancient kingdoms of the two nations, namely the states of Axum and Merowe. Even though there has been both cordiality and opposition between the two nations, the characterization of Sudan’s relationship with Ethiopia after independence was negative. One of the reasons was religious extremism. In this regard, the accusation against Sudan came from two directions. One, it attempted to spread religious extremism. The effort, however, did not succeed since there was a culture of religious tolerance and the new state had already redressed existing religious inequalities derived from the previous undemocratic systems. The imminence of the danger, however, will persist until the nation implements all aspects of religious equality, the spread of education and modern thinking, as well as improvements in the economy.

The document also mentions that Ethiopia’s relationship with the Middle East is by far more important than the other African countries, in terms of its potential for the development and security of the nation. Historically, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity mingled with Ethiopianness have become permanent marks of Ethiopia’s identity. As negative influences, it also mentions the issues of water related to the Nile, the various conflicts between Muslim sultanates and Christian kings, a mutual suspicion towards one another grounded on ignorance, and the Arab-Israeli conflict that required complete allegiance with either Arab or Israel. The defining feature of Egypt and Ethiopia’s relationship is the Nile River. In Ethiopia’s perception, Egypt is a nation that undermines the possibility of a strong Ethiopia, which might strengthen Ethiopia’s position towards the use of the Nile. The document laments Egypt’s default setting as an agent of Middle East countries, but due to its interest in the Nile River Egypt continues to depict Ethiopia negatively. Therefore, Egypt’s stance works against Ethiopia’s interest. This problem grows even more as extremism gains ground. The problem of Ethiopia and Egypt, however, does have a far-reaching consequence of affecting Ethiopia’s relation with Middle East countries since the nation has an influence on Arabs.

Ethiopia’s negative relations with Middle East countries is also in a way influenced by a religious sentiment besides politics, more specifically religious extremism. The evaluation in the religious extremism discourse, however, centered on the two alternate narratives among Muslims. The definition of religious extremist and moderate narratives hinges on the stance each takes towards Ethiopia. According to the foreign policy document (2002, pp. 113-114):

*The moderate Muslim believes that Ethiopia is a country, which [sic] received the first followers of the Prophet, the first Hijrah (pilgrimage) country, a respected country that a believer should not touch if it does not touch him. Because of this, he prefers to consider it a*
special place different from other countries. The extremist, on the other hand, preaches that it was the Ethiopian king who gave refuge to the followers of the Prophet and that he had been converted to Islam, though he did not make it public for fear of the people. Therefore, the people are the enemy. Ethiopia should be categorized as the first “Andalusia,” the land that betrayed Islam. So it has come to pass that when the extremist line prevails, Ethiopia becomes susceptible to danger; and when moderation reigns, Ethio-Arab relations improve.

For an observer, it is not that difficult to observe that due care is extended in the discourse of religious extremism in relation to religious radicalism. The policy document refrains from discussing the matter openly and no names have been mentioned. This is quite a contrast to the way the Gulf nations are portrayed within Ethiopia’s state media. In discussions of religious extremism, the issue is a matter of national interest. Religious extremism is thus an issue for Ethiopia since its base derives from a negative perception of the nation. One could note the bare minimum that the document took into account in defining religious extremism. The document falls short of saying anything about Gulf States’ involvement in exporting a radicalized version of Islam. In relative terms, thus, the discourse of religious radicalism is intentionally blurred in comparison to the neighboring countries. The ambivalence in the discourse derives from the fact that Ethiopia thinks that the potential for foreign direct investment from these countries is very significant. This investment potential is thus the likely cause that the potential Islamic fundamentalism threat exported from these countries remained unnamed.

The ambivalent language employed towards the Gulf States presents a clearer picture when one notes the foreign policy of Ethiopia towards the US. As explained above, part of the interest in the Gulf States emanates from the region’s geographic proximity and its potential as an inflow of investment. A further reason for Ethiopia’s interest in the region derives from the international attention the region enjoys, especially from the US. In relation to the last point, the foreign policy document further states that (2002, pp. 117-118):

The policy we have adopted in connection with the peace and security of our region is consistent with that of the U.S. There is no doubt that the U.S. is the most powerful influence in today’s world, and that it is playing a prominent role in the Middle East. Securing the political and diplomatic support of the U.S. has a great bearing for the success of our efforts to achieve peace and security. It is clear that working in consultation with the U.S. would be necessary and beneficial. There will be occasions when we shall have our differences, and we will need to try to bridge them in the context of the strategic value of the relationship. In our efforts to prevent conflict in our region, we need to consider what role the U.S. can play and
resolve differences that may emerge from time to time, separating the major issues from those [that] are not so important. Strict adherence to such an approach is important.

Here the language is clearer. Ethiopia recognizes the historic imperative of its geostrategic role in the Middle East by indicating a complete allegiance with the US. In doing so, it attempts to secure US prominence to its own advantage. Thus, the leadership of the US in its policy direction is openly pronounced. In cases where there are choices of allegiance to either the Middle East countries or the US, obviously the latter is the preference. It is in this line that the foreign policy document clearly states that consultation with the US would be necessary and beneficial.

7.1.6 The 2005 election: Muslims as allies

There is a consensus that the 2005 election was unprecedented in the democratization process of Ethiopian history. There were rekindled hopes that the fate of the political parties hinged upon the citizens’ choices. The enthusiastic dreams and inspiration that the citizens determine their future through the ballots sprang up spontaneously. The political institutions and the cultures, however, lagged behind. Political parties marshaled support through televised debates. Those who forfeited their voter registration on the ground that the 2005 election would likely be the same as the previous elections felt guilty, as the last few days exhibited a dramatic turn in expectation.

What made the new election was its campaign. The state-controlled media aired the political debates live in prime time. Besides allowing its own media, the state also permitted mass rallies for and against political parties that attracted many. In the process, both the private media and Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) also played a significant role. The private media usually sided with opposition parties and stood against the EPRDF. NGOs were also instrumental in “bringing together the coalition that sought to observe the 2005 elections” and securing the necessary finance (Dizard, Walker, & Tucker, 2012, p. 240). As Election Day approached, it became clear that what the EPRDF espoused was an ethnic-based approach, while the opposition parties talked about unity and patriotic nationalism, criticizing the ethnic politics of the EPRDF as being against the unity of Ethiopians.

Many researchers and observers note that the 2005 election in comparison to the previous elections and the ones that followed is unique. The emphasis was on the fact that the election was nearly democratic. Many, however, fail to note that Ethiopian Muslim activists were very critical towards the opposition parties. Jemal’s (2012a, p. 289) assessment of the few months before the election was, “In that season emotion dominated reason, there was not a balanced approach and many became blinded.” Unlike the popular perceptions, Muslim activists did not support the opposition parties but rather the EPRDF. Their choice to side with the EPRDF and openly advocate
among the Muslim community was due to two reasons. First, Muslims recognized that they enjoyed relatively better freedom in the EPRDF than under any other state in Ethiopia. The EPRDF thus proved itself as a provider of religious freedom. Second, Muslim activists feared the relative gains of Muslims would likely be reversed if the opposition parties won. In relation to the latter, it is important to look into two developments prior to the election, particularly the ethiomedia website and a document that circulated among the Christian communities.

In late 2003 and throughout 2004, the ethiomedia website presented articles that paint the religious vitalization among the Muslim community as radicalism and the state as supporting their cause. The first article appeared on the website on September 26, 2003, titled “Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabism and the threat to Ethiopia’s national security.” In line with the popular discourse, it begins by noting that the formative period of Islam owes much to Ethiopia for its very survival, and there are prominent Islamic personalities that have Ethiopian ancestry. It also hails the majority of Ethiopian Islam as religiously tolerant. It denounces Wahhabism as intolerant Islam from the historic enemy of Ethiopia, i.e., Saudi Arabia. The author notes that Saudi Arabia is financing the building of mosques and madrasahs (Islamic religious schools). He goes on to accuse the madrasahs of being “brainwashing sessions and jihad factories” harboring anti-Christian, anti-Jew, and anti-American sentiments. He calls on the state to put an end to the radical activities in Ethiopia before it gets too late. The author also accuses the Saudis of paying 5,000 Birr for converters (Zelalem, 2004).

On December 25, 2003, a Muslim writer presented his commentary on Alem Zelalem’s article titled “Ethiopian-ness on trial: In the name of Wahhabism.” He characterizes Alem’s article as “deceitful and poisonous” and construes the overall discussion as an assault against the Ethiopianness of Muslims. The writer points out that the Ethiopianness criterion should not be the acceptance of Christianity, challenging the nearly synonymous use of “Ethiopian” and “Christian.” He writes, “Alem’s own religious delusion and fanaticism, coupled with his hatred and contempt for Arabs, has made him sidestep the geopolitical and economic interests of Ethiopia’s long-standing and historical enemies.” The presentation challenges the characterization of Ethiopia as a Christian nation that treats all religious adherents equally. The author laments the political marginalization of the non-Orthodox as the other in the previous states and praises the religious freedom in the present. In his assessment, Muslims showed “un-reciprocated tolerance.” He also asserts that Muslims in Ethiopia constitute 45% of the population and thus are not minorities. His take on the nature and the history of Ethiopian Wahhabism is not as a recent development but rather as an older peace-loving school “that has been there by side [sic] with other schools of Islam” (Chissu, 2003).

On July 3, 2004, another article critical of recent developments in Ethiopia appeared on the same website. Titled “The emergence of radical Islam in Ethiopia (1991-2004),” the article was written by Johannes Sebhatu. It presents the reception of Ethiopians as a “magnanimous act
displayed by the Ethiopians.” It also presents the Ottoman Turks, the Sudanese Mahdists, the Egyptians, and the Arab League as historical enemies. The writer claims, “Presently, however, Ethiopia is being exposed to the danger of political and fundamentalist Islam. The security threat has been looming particularly in the last thirteen years.” It also states, “The Christians, mainly the Orthodox Christians, which were supposed to be the flag bearers of Ethiopian nationalism and independence, are being systematically marginalized.” It also claims, “Islamic activists [are] quickly getting more militant, richer, arrogant and sectarian.” It goes on to lament the public visibility of Muslims in Ethiopia. It looks negatively upon the political ascendancy of Muslims and the flourishing of their businesses, reasoning that both are the results of external sources of finance and are signs that Muslims are engaging in lucrative and illicit business. It similarly calls on the liberal and democratic societies to intervene. It paints Saudi Arabia as an exporter of radical Islam in Ethiopia and critical of the state. The article accuses the Saudi via the intolerant Wahhabi ideology of trying to disestablish the nation. It also presents TPLF as a party that undermines both the unity of Ethiopia and territorial integrity. The pieces of evidence offered were circumstantial.

The article goes even further and claims that the Islamic newspaper and NGOs are part of the greater conspiracy to dismantle Ethiopia and the objective of the newly built mosques and madrasahs is not religious but rather ideological and to make Ethiopia Islam. It also calls on the state to take immediate actions. There were responses to this article. Muslims responded to the article calling it a “cheap and falsehood [sic] article,” “completely out of the truth,” and “baseless claims.” As a follow-up on July 15, 2004, a writer called Hibret Selamu wrote another article titled “Proof of Wahhabi activities in Ethiopia.” In this regard, two sets of evidence were brought forward. The first evidence is the letter by EIASC leaders to the prime minister accusing the Wahhabi advocates of securing 4 million riyals to control the various levels of administration. The second one relates to the fact that the leadership of the EIASC was dismissed on the charge of corruption and working for the benefit of the Saudis rather than Ethiopia (Hiberet, 2004).

Inherent to the discussion was that the connection of Ethiopian Muslims with their coreligionists in Saudi Arabia was painted in a negative light. Mosques, madrasahs, Islamic newspapers, and NGOs were painted in a negative light as working against the concept of Ethiopianness. Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity was also linked with the nation. What this article and similar conversations brought is fear. The Christian critics considered those Muslims who were competing to gain an upper hand in the EIASC leadership as Islamic radicals. This discussion invoked a great deal of fear and spurred many discussions. Jemal (2012a, p. 289) summarizes, “Many of the members of the jema had a different stance than the majority after going through matured debate without considering their ethnic background, without calculating economic benefit, without being the members of the party.”
In relation to the period, it is also important to look into how Islamic communities responded. In this regard, Islamic media and Islamic preachers played a significant part. On May 1, 2005, the Addis Ababa Islamic Supreme Council prepared a forum in which Hassen Taju, a young Muslim, presented guidelines that went on to shape the attitudes of the Muslim communities as they participated in the upcoming elections. In the paper presentation, no party name was mentioned. The paper employed as the analytical framework the Ibn Al-Qayyim principle of choosing the lesser of the two evils and the strategy of Fiqh al-Muwazanat (Jemal, 2012a, p. 290). The choice of these two principles indicates that the new society was enthusiastically committed to the teachings of Islam in their totality (darajah al-kamal) and was striving to abide by those teachings in its state, political, economic and social organizations; its relations with other states; its educational system and moral values; and all other aspects of its way of life. Applying of Islam comprehensively was the objective of Ethiopian Islamic activism, but in doing so, the activists wanted to be not idealistic but rather realistic, taking into account the Ethiopian context. The activists thus promoted relaxation of duties and flexibility while pursuing their policy, without losing sight of the fact that, in their view, reform was needed among the Muslim population and the society.

7.1.7 Conclusion

The goal of this section was to observe new developments relating to the EPRDF’s policy towards Islam. To that end, the section showed that the state tightened its control over the EIASC candidacy following an internal struggle to control its leadership with Wahhabism-oriented leaders. The support by the EPRDF of non-Wahhabism Muslims was the result of myriad factors, of which its new role in the GWOT played a significant role in shaping the nature of the reform movement. The increasing intra-religious rivalries that were marked by Wahhabism orientations have also taken root in the country partly because of the implementation of devolution. The devolution not only provided an opportunity for the reform movements to thrive and gave them access to land where the new madrasahs and mosques could be built, but it also made their very nature to be local. Thus, the movements were isolated.

Following 9/11, both opportunities and constraints emerged. The securitization of literature espousing a radical ideology and the scrutiny of finances were some of the constraints. The new climate also resulted in the closure of some Islamic NGOs. An opportunity is that Saudi Arabia’s dedication to the region increased in order to gain a stronger foothold in the region. It also came to the attention of Ethiopian communities that stricter and literalist interpretations of Islam had gained a stronger footing, and yet Wahhabism was unable to penetrate the larger society due to its fundamentalist nature, which is not congruent with the society with the exception of a few youths. Interreligious conflicts also started to surface in many places, and public spaces became points of
conflict. Most of the conflicts were inextricably intertwined with the ethnic discourse. The Muslim communities also showed their allegiance to the EPRDF in 2005. Thus, the policy of the EPRDF towards Islam was to curb the foreign-supported influence of Wahhabism and to empower non-Wahhabism in the leadership.

The first year of the post-2001 period saw a slow recognition of the footing of Islamic fundamentalism. Part of the realization came from the fact that there were intra-religious conflicts within the Muslim communities and an attempt to control the leadership of the EIASC for furthering influence beyond mosques financed by the Gulf States. The construing of Wahhabism as a disestablishing force was also driven by the newly renewed alliance with the US-led Global War on Terrorism. The period was also marked by various polemics between the EOTC and reform-oriented Muslims. In all these aspects, the approach of the state was generally to exercise control to ensure that those who advocate a Wahhabi interpretation of Islam do not have a seat in the leadership of the EIASC. Thus, the period signified a policy of combating religious radicalism through the screening of the leadership of the EIASC.

7.2 Interfaith Dialogue (2005-2008): Countering Radicalization Signs

7.2.1 Background

As I have noted, at the end of the previous period (2001-2005) the competition among Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters and Sufi Muslims to hold seats in the EIASC increased. The anti-Wahhabist interpreters eventually stood victorious by co-opting the state in the internal power struggle. In the perception of the state, following the intra-religious conflicts in the Muslim communities and the new alliance with the US-led GWOT, the Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters’ image became that of extremists and intolerant, while Sufism conveyed the historic religious accommodation and moderation. The earlier signified foreignness and instability and the latter was seen as indigenous and peaceful. When the power struggle ended, Sufism had earned the status of official representatives of the Muslim communities in Ethiopia that define the normative Islam. This does not mean that those who follow the interpretation of Wahhabism promoted anything other than peace. It is during this period that the discourse of moderate and extremist Islam surfaced in the political discourse of the state.

In the following sections, I attempt to show that the state started to recognize the reality of religious radicalism, but its response was that of mobilizing the religious community leaders to contain it. The state did not take an assertive stance throughout the period, despite the fact that intra-religious conflicts increased and Ethiopian troops invaded Somalia to contain the Islamic threat. In order to show that the state approach was the promotion of interreligious dialogue, I will be looking into the intra-religious conflicts and the state’s measures to contain them. I will also discuss the
cultural programming strategy of the US to contain Islamic radicalism in Ethiopia. I also look at the narrowing down of the political space that is intolerant of any dissent and the various proclamations issued to the same effect. The role of Ethiopia in Somalia and the effect it caused are also topics of concern.

The interfaith dialogue sub-sections discuss the state’s policy between the years 2005 to 2008. The overall argument is that the state policy during this period was the promotion of interfaith dialogue in order to counter the emerging radicalization signs. In order to establish this thesis, I look at the competition between Sufi-oriented EIASC leaders and loosely connected individuals that promote the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. In this regard, I look into mosques as a competitive space (7.2.2) and the advantage of the Wahhabi-oriented interpreters over the EIASC leadership dominated by Sufi-oriented interpreters. I also look at the failed attempt to reclaim EIASC leadership in line with scripturally correct Islam and the role of the state and the Diaspora of Ethiopian Muslims (7.2.3). I also document the state approach of containing interreligious dialogue to promote peace and stability (7.2.4). In order to emphasize the role of the US in informing the Ethiopian state’s policy towards Islam, I look also at the cultural programming that the US embassy in Ethiopia undertook. In relation to cooperating with the US, I also discuss the Ethiopian Army’s penetration into neighboring Somalia (7.2.7), arguing that there is an imminent Islamic radicalism threat. In the final section, I also set forth the new proclamations and regulations intended to stifle dissent of any type and how they affects the Muslim communities in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Diaspora (7.2.8).

7.2.2 The mosques as competitive spaces

The post-2005 period leadership of the EIASC has thus come to be characterized by not only a Sufi orientation but also a strong anti-Wahhabi stance. With the new leadership and the state’s oversight, while the violent suppressions of Sufism in various parts of Ethiopia ended, actively denouncing the Sufi practices as “innovations” somehow continued. The new leadership of the EIASC that has an anti-Wahhabi stance, however, did not have effective control over developments within the Muslim communities. The anti-Wahhabi, Sufi-oriented leaders continued to complain that the financial resources at the EIASC’s disposal were not on par with the resources marshaled by those who advocated Salafi-Wahhabi interpretations of Islam. The initial hope of the leadership to solicit financial support from the state did not materialize. In the assessment of the state, various reform-oriented movements’ impact upon the Muslim community was minimal, and the radicalizing messages were not deeply rooted.

Part of the failure of the EIASC to curb the popularity of the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretations of Islam among the Muslim communities is due to the decentralized nature of Islam in Ethiopia. The decentralization of mosques, as institutions run by the local communities, permitted the Wahhabi
interpretation of Islam to take root among young Muslim communities. Young imams inclined towards the Salafi interpretation of Islam continued to run private madrasah in various parts of Ethiopia. They were appointed as imams both in newly constructed mosques and in the older mosques by replacing the previous imams.

The sources of finance for building the mosques, however, are not that clear since they were of a private nature. The charge of the state and the communities is that they are from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The newly constructed mosques were mostly built through the private connections of the young imams. The newly built mosques’ appearances are not only impressive but are also beyond the reaches of the immediate community, given that the construction periods were so short and the buildings are magnificent. This is not to deny that the local community participated in the construction of mosques. But in cases where the local Muslim communities marshaled resources to build mosques, not only are the mosques modest but they also took a relatively long time to finish the construction.

The newly constructed mosques are also usually not very far from the older mosques. Over a period, the popularity of the teachings of the young imams attracts not only youths who used to be religiously passive but also active youths from the previous mosque within the same vicinity. As the new interpretation of Islam spread, it became very common to hear young Muslims despising the previous imams as incompetent in relation to expounding Islam in line with “the correct interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith.” The mechanism of replacing the older imam with the new in the older mosques usually spurred controversies. According to the EIASC, the dominant means was through incitement. The strategy has been that the young imams first attempt to organize loyal discipleship that is committed to their cause. Following that, the young imams instigate a mob against the older imam, accuse him as incompetent for religious duty, and vote him out of his position. By doing so, the young imam with a Salafi orientation becomes the main imam of the old mosque. Increasingly, thus, especially in the rural part of Ethiopia, Salafi-Wahhabi-inclined imams dominate mosques.

7.2.3 Reclaiming the EIASC

As I have observed, the official representatives of Ethiopian Muslims in the EIASC became Sufi Muslims who hold anti-Wahhabi stances. Reversing the power balance between the Sufi and reform-oriented Wahhabi from within proved a failure, given that the former co-opted the state. The post-2005 election incidents and the state’s brutal actions towards its opponent created fear in the society. The 2008 celebration of the Ethiopian millennium, however, provided a window of opportunity to negotiate about Ethiopian Muslims. In the negotiation effort, the role of Bader stood tall. Bader, an Ethiopian Diaspora Association in the United States, was established in the late 1990s. Its objectives
are Islamic propagation, organizing the Muslim community, advocating against human rights violations against Muslims, and participating in development.

Bader managed to coordinate and send delegates representing the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora Association from North America, Europe, and the Middle East. Despite the fact that the overall mission of the delegation was to negotiate about Ethiopian Muslims with the state, the state media depicted the delegation’s visit as relating to the 2008 Ethiopian millennium celebration. The delegation had the opportunity to meet the prime minister and submit a 13-point request. Our concern here is only in relation to the first question.\textsuperscript{15} The centrality of the first question is evident not only because it comes first in the list but also because the issue recurred as the dominant theme throughout the document.

The delegation characterized the EIASC as follows: የእስምልምና ከዳዮቹ የወለክ የሚለት በሙስሊሙ ከብረተሰቡ መርወ የሚሸጥ ዓሉ፣ የወለክ ያለሸቸው የእስምልምና ከዳዮቹ ያስፋሰው ከወለክ ከተለ_sensitive የእስማልምና ከዳዮቹ ያስፋፋመረ። (The EIASC is an institution that has little trust among the Muslim community, does not represent the Muslim community, and has failed to provide any service). The document expounds on the characterization further and calls on the state to respond positively to the request of the Muslim community to change the administration of the EIASC.

According to the delegates, the EIASC had lost the trust of the Muslim community since it failed to meet their expectations. The Muslim community expected the EIASC to play a leadership role in articulating and defending their questions, in mobilizing the Muslim community to play an active role in relation to development and growth, in strengthening relations with Muslim countries, and in promoting tolerance and respect in other Ethiopians. The most common questions of the time were about educational institutions and securing the legal status of mosques in both Addis Ababa and the regions. The wearing of hijab and niqāb has been an issue in some institutions, and many Muslims felt that the EIASC was not defending them. Most of the newly built mosques also did not secure the necessary permits from the state. In comparison to their Christian counterparts, nonprofit Islamic organizations were also minimal.

According to the delegates, the failure of the EIASC was not only that it failed to discharge its responsibility but also played a negative role. The negative role charges listed against the EIASC include the leadership counting concerned nation-loving Muslims as enemies, creating divisiveness among the Muslim community by classifying some as legal and others as illegal, engaging in labeling and defamation, obstructing the activities and affairs of legally established Islamic institutions, and engaging in unfruitful theological matters that promote only divisions. To these criticisms, it was also added that the leaders exhibited professional incompetency, engaged in

\textsuperscript{15} For a detailed discussion of the question, see Derje (2014).
corruption, and created an unhealthy relationship between the Muslim communities and the state as well as with other religions.

The appeal of the delegation to the state indicates the perception that the leadership of the EIASC had the endorsement of the state. The approach was that of convincing the state by showing the stakes at hand and viewing the overall question within the rubric of human rights and constitutional provisions. The efforts to convince the state to change the administration did not bring to fruition the envisioned change in the leadership of the EIASC. The delegation, however, managed to succeed in establishing a peace committee to resolve the contentious doctrinal issues, composed of `ulama that advocated the Sufi and Wahhabi interpretations of Islam. The committees met regularly once a week for three months. The debating forum came to be known as the Addis Ababa Ulama Unity Forum. Its success, however, was short-lived since the Federal EIASC in February 2009 not only abolished it but also removed the Addis Ababa EIASC that hosted the forum.

### 7.2.4 Interreligious conflicts

The year 2006 to 2008 reports of international religious freedom provide a pattern that could be contrasted with the 2001 to 2005 period’s interreligious conflicts (USDOS, 2005a, 2006, 2007, 2008). From these reports, it is clear that religious conflicts increased. The conflicts occurred where Muslims are the majority. More specifically, with the exception of the April 15, 2005 incidents of the Somalia region and the July 16, 2006 mosque construction controversy of Addis Ababa, all the clashes were in the Oromia region. What makes this period further different is that unlike the previous period (2001-2005), evangelical Christians were also attacked by some Muslims and more so than EOTC members.

With the exception of one case, unlike the previous periods, the attacks against evangelicals and EOTC adherents were on typical days, not at celebrations of religious holidays or any other religious public gatherings. This development is in contrast to the previous period, where most religious-related conflicts took place in relation to holiday celebrations and the claiming of public spaces. The periodic conflictual encounters of the period also fed into a widespread perception among Christians that the attacks were premeditated and carefully planned. In a few instances, there were massacres that included among others the slaughtering of Christians. There was also a forced proselytization, in which Christians were forced to renounce their faith and embrace Islam.

Even if there could be connections with ethnicity, it was very clear that the attacks were primarily religiously motivated. The above incidents, however, do not imply that a religious war started between Muslims and Christians. As stated above, the conflicts were limited to a few areas. Many Christians consider the local leadership part of the conspiracy of Islamic radicalism. In fact, the situation was too much for the local police and the federal police had to intervene to restore law
and order. The leadership of the religious institutions worked in cooperation with each other to resolve the matters. Despite a few defensive postures among the religious adherents, members of both religions denounced the cases.

Leaders of the Muslim Diaspora Association tend to present these incidents as having been instigated by the Christians. Local religious leaders of both traditions also pointed out that the radicalization was the result of foreign influence. An NGO called Interfaith Peace Building Initiative played a role in the reconciliation effort. The state sent federal police to the vicinities to contain the conflicts and arranged a heavy military presence so that similar clashes would not erupt. The state also took administrative measures against local authorities who did not take appropriate measures to contain the incidents.

The trauma of the incidents had far-reaching consequences. In the initial days, videotapes circulated among the Christian communities that graphically depicted the scenes, creating a sense of both fear and resentment towards Islamic radicalism. Later, however, the state banned the circulation of these videos out of fear that they might entice violence and revenge. Until today, any discussion related to religious radicalism and extremism invokes those incidents among Christians. Therefore, any discussion that attempts to discount Islamic religious radicalism among ordinary Christians immediately meets with opposition, citing these incidents.

The incidents also led to the resurrection of the historic religious conflict of Ahmed Gragn, feeding the suspicion that when radical Muslims hold power they endanger the prevailing peace and security. There is a pervasive fear that the new Islam promoted among the youth is intolerant and radical. Many Christians fear that in areas where Muslims are dominant, there is no guarantee that such incidents would not materialize in the future. Their frustration is not only with the religious extremists but also with local officials, who they think have participated in the massacre at times by passively observing it and in other cases by being a direct agent of the process.

The 2005-2008 years exhibited many more interreligious clashes than the previous years, especially in the southwestern Oromia region. The approach of the state during this period was to mobilize interfaith joint commissions in order that the attacks do not spread throughout the country. It was a strategy of containing atrocities, some of which were clearly massacres. In this period, the state also prohibited the circulation of footage of massacres with the fear that it might provoke interreligious conflict. The private and state media refrained from speaking about it since the state followed a policy of suppressing the dissemination of the information. The fear was that the dissemination might result in vengeance and resentment from the other religious communities.

The religious radicalism discourse had been generally absent in state-controlled media since 2006, marked by the violent incidents in the Jimma area where many Christians fled from the region after many churches were burned. In the blurred news of the state media, the blame was laid on the
Islamic sect called the Kharijites. The state felt that the distribution of violent video footage might fuel interreligious conflicts. Thus, the state banned its distribution. Despite the fact that the media was silent, some religious books came out immediately, especially from EOTC adherents. These books voiced the injustice, not as an isolated incident but rather as the extension of radical Islam, that was targeting Ethiopia for forceful Islamic conversion. It is no wonder that in the next celebration of the finding of the true cross, the slogans clearly indicated the anger of the Christian communities.

The action was not only visible but also quite offensive to the Muslim communities, and a very unhealthy and competitive spirit emerged. In the next Islamic celebration, a sort of response from Islamic communities occurred. As the Muslim communities were marching to the national stadium, where the celebration was taking place, they made themselves more visible than ever. Some of them even employed microphones with which they chanted, “La ilaha illa-llah, Muhammu-rasulu-llah (There is no god but only God, Muhammad is the prophet of God),” a proclamation of their religion.

The release of the 2007 census also caused tension. The issue was about numbers. Some Ethiopian Muslims thought that their numbers were underestimated. For them, 33.9% is unacceptable since various sources estimated the Muslim population within the range of 45% to 70%. Thus, they asserted that the minimum should have been 45%, the estimate of the CIA World Fact Book. In fact, this was the first reason that led to a public demonstration of the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora in the United States. In fact, the contention over numbers related not only to Muslims but also to the Amhara. The later census results adjusted the numbers of the Amhara but mocked the request of the Muslims.

In responding to the Muslims’ request, the Central Statistics Authority head (CSA), who happened to be a Muslim, made a remark against the contentions. In her opinion, the claim was misinformed and based on the increased public gatherings at public spaces following the constitutionally endowed freedom. Thus, the larger numbers gathering should not be considered as a proxy for the growth in adherents. The dispute, however, was not settled. It continued as one of the questions the Diaspora delegation passed along to Meles Zenawi. Later on also, the NGO proclamation issued in 2009 and the anti-terrorism law became further points of discussion. There was a feeling of discontent with both proclamations from both political parties and Muslim activists. Both felt that there was no such imminent danger to the nation and that the newly promulgated laws served as a means of silencing the victims’ demands for rights.

The presence of federal police also increased in conflict areas. Meles Zenawi called in the November 23, 2006 Parliament for the religious leaders and parents to take the lead. The perception of the state was the perpetrators were small enough in number that the local elderly leadership could change them. In fact, this conflictual area turned into a success story through the involvement of the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia in a project that mobilized the local religious leaders. Then there
were reports that the cordial relationship between Christians and Muslims resumed its pre-conflict state. Following Meles’ call, major religious leaders made a statement in December 2006. The statement was a joint statement issued by the heads of the EOTC, the EIASC, the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE), and the ECC.

The call of the religious leaders was towards peace and reconciliation. The state also encouraged secular and faith-based organizations to find a lasting solution to such conflicts. The state acted by removing some state officials to appease the anger of the Christian communities, but in terms of legal action, not much followed. Given that the overall approach was initiating a reconciliatory forum among Christians and Muslims in traditional ways, the approach did not pursue the matter in courts. The religious organizations, the elderly, and the faith-based NGOs in collaboration with federal and newly installed local state officials took the initiative to formulate frameworks for healthy dialogue aimed at reconciliation (USDOS, 2007). In the process of peace building, Interfaith Peace Building Initiative (IPI) took a leading role.

IPI is a member of the United Religions Initiative (URI) that started working in Ethiopia in 1997 as the Ethiopian chapter of the URI. It was registered with the Ministry of Justice as an indigenous NGO with the IPI name in October 2003. The purpose of IPI is to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation; to end religiously motivated violence; and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the earth and all living things. Generally, IPI is a peace organization dedicated to promoting harmony among different religions, interfaith dialogue, and building a culture of peace and reconciliation. It serves as the coordinator of the Peace Council, established in 2008 with representatives from the EOTC, the EIASC, the ECC, Ethiopian Evangelical Mekane Yesus Church (EEMYC), the Baha’i Faith, and IPI.

7.2.5 Cultural programming

It was during this period that the US embassy in Ethiopia started to implement cultural programming in order to create a strong buffer against the rising tide of religious radicalism through Wahhabi influences. The implementation of cultural programming was in cooperation with EIASC members and other stakeholders in the Muslim communities. Owing to the fact that the EIASC is working in cooperation with the state, the activities of the US that involved its members were partly the programs of the Ethiopian state. Thus, cultural programming was also the policy of the state during this period through the endorsement of the actions of the EIASC in cooperation with the US embassy in Ethiopia. In fact, most of the state’s recent discourse of Islamic extremism emphasized the fact that Islam in Ethiopia is 14 centuries old and that it does have its own unique history that it is proud of and could share with the rest of the world.
During this period, from 2006 onwards, the US embassy in Ethiopia started to implement cultural programming with the intent to overcome the influence of the Wahhabism interpretation of Islam. The premise behind such arrangements in the policy direction of the US embassy was a perceptive evaluation of the nature of Ethiopian Islam. The history of Ethiopian Muslims endowed them with a sense of pride. Ethiopia Muslims are proud of their religious history, their faith, and their practices. These heritages of the past are thus social infrastructures and buffers that sustain the existing tolerance culture within the communities. Thus, in the conception of the US, Wahhabism as understood as a cultural imperialism and an external import will have a long way to go until it establishes itself against such a culture. The cultural programming program initiatives were thus attempts to boost and maintain the existing pride so that a radical interpretation of Islam cannot easily find a footing in the nation. As the WikiLeaks cables and the actions of the US embassy attest, the overall strategy was to capitalize on places, objects, and traditions of Islamic culture in order to maintain interreligious peace.

In relation to places, there were available grants to preserve shrines, more specifically the Sheikh Hussein Shrine in Bale, and historical sites of prominent personalities that contain historical materials in relation to Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia. This sort of initiative created a mixed feeling among the Muslim communities. For reformists, it was additional evidence that indicates that the US was doing its best to help the “true Islam” to gain its footing in the nation. For Sufi-oriented Muslims and those who cherish the culture, it was a commendable effort. In relation to objects also, Islamic manuscript preservation, acquisition, and the establishment of a study center were part of the program. Owing to the fact that most of the Ethiopian Islamic culture has an oral tradition, the cultural programming initiative had programs that would preserve the oral history. The support of the projects was not disguised but rather publicly acknowledged.

The initiative also further hoped to provide an intellectual buffer against the Wahhabism interpretation of Islam, which was assumed as unorthodox. The initiative was coupled with an attempt to translate and disseminate books that depicted Wahhabism in a negative light. In line with this, there was an attempt to translate two books. The selected books for translation were *The place of tolerance in Islam* and *The great theft*. The three languages in mind were Amharic, Oromifa (the language of the Oromo people), and Somali. The translation effort, however, was not successful because capable translators rejected the offer after reading the books. According to them, the translation of the books was indeed essential, but they distanced themselves from the project. The WikiLeaks cables do not provide specific details besides mentioning that translating the works would bring negative consequences upon them.

During this period, the embassy also took the initiative to meet leaders of the EIASC and Wahhabism-oriented personalities. The Ethiopian state, however, did not adopt the new direction of
inclusiveness of the US embassy of Ethiopia. The state not only sided with EIASC members but also excluded the increasing portion of the Islamic population that was accepting the reformed view of Islam in line with Wahhabism. What was equally unfortunate is that the legitimacy of the EIASC leadership dwindled over the period since they were not effective in the provision of services, like facilitation of the annual pilgrimage journey to Mecca. In siding only with EIASC members who are against Wahhabism, the state again fell into an essentialist perspective that Wahhabism is inherently a fixed ideology that does not interact much with a local context. In reality, however, over a period people of a Wahhabism orientation have increased their tolerance towards the Sufi orientation and become sympathizers of the practitioners. They have also promoted a secularist state, given that the religious landscape of the nation is very diverse.

7.2.6 The narrowing of political space

The post-election period of 2005 was the most contentious due to the previous election, which caused a prolonged review process. Unsurprisingly, the results announced in September 2005 declared the EPRDF’s victory. Opposition parties took over 172 of 547 parliamentary seats and 137 of the 138 seats on the Addis Ababa municipal council. The EPRDF clearly lost the capital city. In terms of the nation’s history, the number of seats secured by the opposition parties was astounding. The opposition members, however, were unconvinced of the review process. As a result, they called for a boycott and civil disobedience to the election results. The opposition reached its peak in November 2005; EPRDF security forces detained opposition leaders, journalists, human rights advocates, and thousands of civilians. Later, the state charged the detainees with intent to subvert the constitution. In a way, the sanctions forced about 90% of opposition leaders who won the election to join the Parliament in fear.

Islamic radio outlets very commonly speak of this incident. The 2005 election is recalled in two ways. First, it is to state that most of the seats that the EPRDF won were in areas where Muslims are the majority. Thus, they recount the incident to create an image that reciprocity is not the nature of the EPRDF. Culturally speaking, reciprocity is a virtue sought-after. Its failure thus leads to discrediting any further relations with such a party. Second, the incidents indicate how the EPRDF meets any kind of resistance. To this end, they indicate the pattern of the EPRDF with regard to any dissenting voices. The patterns identified are a series of steps. The EPRDF shows the willingness to sit around the table for discussions and to affirm the validity of the questions. In the process of proposing alternatives to the matter, it provides a pseudo solution that divides the unity of dissenting voices and privately intimidates members. In cases where parties to the discussion reject the proposal advanced, to create an impression that the state accommodates voices of dissent it engages in massive propaganda implicating the opposition with the intention of disrupting the peace. Then, it
takes the case to its kangaroo court and finally passes a verdict of guilty. Once the verdict of guilty is passed, it shows an openness to pardon if the guilty accepts their request as a mistake and gives up any involvement in relation to similar incidents. It is in this light that the overall presentations of the recent opposition movements are colored with the language of persistence, persecution, martyrdom, unity, and sacrifice.

### 7.2.7 Ethiopia and Somalia

Islamic Courts (IC) were created in Somalia in the mid-1990s with the support of local communities to establish laws and orders, and they served a specific clan. At that time in terms of orientation, the courts were moderate and devoid of radical Islamic interpretations. Progressively, however, they became a springboard for the new radical Islamist movement. In 2004, they fell under the control of radical Islamists, led by Hassen Dahir Awey (K. Menkhaus, 2007, pp. 85-86). Ethiopia was following with concern the developments within Somalia. The concern derived from the fact that some of the leaders of the Council of Islamic Courts (CIC) were former leaders of AIAI, which had repeatedly attacked Ethiopia in the mid-1990s. After pushing aside the TFG, the CIC came to power in June 2006 and declared jihad on Ethiopia the following month, bringing Ethiopia’s fear to a climax. On November 23, 2006, Meles Zenawi proposed a motion that authorized Ethiopia to take “any necessary” measure to defend itself from the attack of the CIC of Somalia. The request was made on the ground that jihad was declared against Ethiopia, the greater Somalia vision had been resurrected, and the outlawed ONLF and OLF insurgents had been provided support (K. Menkhaus, 2007, p. 89; WikiLeaks, 2006).

The intervention officially started December 24, 2006, and Ethiopian troops stayed in Somalia until January 2009 (Aimé, 2013, pp. 32-33). The purpose of the incursion was to reinstall the TFG of Somalia, which is an ally of Ethiopia, the US, and the EU. With US support, Ethiopia launched an occupation of southern Somalia in early December 2006, with troops protecting the TFG as it relocated from Nairobi to Baidoa. The Ethiopia-TFG alliance later vied for other regions of southern Somalia, including Mogadishu, but never solidified its control (Link & Raleigh, 2012, p. 52).

Individual Islamic courts slowly integrated more recently, however, culminating in the formation of the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts (SCIC) in 2006. As SCIC gained control of southern Somalia, the US began supplying funding and weapons to a group of anti-Islamist businesspersons and militia leaders named the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT). The ARPCT eventually clashed with SCIC militias in street battles during the spring of 2006, with the SCIC emerging victorious. After this decisive victory, the SCIC initiated a campaign that eventually took control of southern Somalia. SCIC’s success was framed as an important threat by the Ethiopian administration because some secessionist groups within Ethiopia,
including the ONLF and the ELF, were reported to have historical ties with AIAI, the SCIC, and the new Al-Shabab Islamist militia (Link & Raleigh, 2012, p. 52). The war within the borders of Somalia to combat Islamic religious fundamentalism at its source also informed the policy of the state during this period.

7.2.8 New proclamations and regulations: Quelling dissent

Following the 2005 election, the state issued various proclamations. Particularly, the December 2008 Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation, the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, and the 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation became contentious. Tronvoll (2011, p. 275) remarks, “Common to all these laws were increased governmental oversight and control of non-governmental initiatives that restricted their operational elbow room, curbed their funding and, to a certain degree, criminalized criticism of state activity and policies.” In a similar line, Arriola (2012, p. 236) remarks, “Despite the constitutional protections for basic civil liberties, since 2008 the EPRDF has enacted legislations – the Mass Media Law, the Charities and Societies Proclamation, and the Anti-Terrorism Law – designed to punish open dissent and discourage autonomous organization.” In the following sections, I look at these newly enacted proclamations and their implications for the Muslim community.

The Media Law

It was only a year after the EPRDF ousted the socialist military state that the first press law ever was enacted. The 1992 law forbade pre-print censorship, established the right of access and dissemination of information, and allowed Ethiopians to run a private press. In light of press freedom ideals, however, the new law was not without criticism. Particularly, there were provisions related to the compulsory registration of media outlets, heavy fines on defamation and incitement in relation to conflict charges, the state’s right to ban materials that threaten its safety, and a legal loophole that allows a priori confiscation of press products on the ground that they could potentially instigate illegal actions. Such tightened control of the private press was consistent with the fact that right from its inception the private media’s general stance towards the EPRDF was antagonistic.

Despite the limiting prohibitions of the 1992 law, the private media was bolstered. In the late 1990s, however, the state started to take harsh measures against critical private media editors, journalists, and political leaders. Those who escaped the state’s intimidation went into exile. The same trend continued also throughout the early 2000 period. The result of such actions was the listing of Meles Zenawi in a list of 38 predators of press freedom by Reporters without Borders in 2001. Despite the bad press it received, the 2008 proclamation improved some shortcomings of 1992. Directly linking the 2008 proclamation with 2005 is not correct since the draft had been
circulated since 2003. Partly, the initiative was in response to the sharp criticisms of human rights organizations.

The 2008 media law enshrined the right to secure information from public offices, abolished the licensing of new print publications and news agencies, acknowledged private press, prohibited pre-trial detention of journalists, and included an explicit clause guaranteeing that journalists can form professional organizations. Since 1992, the state had employed its provisions on defamation and false accusations and not only doubled the financial penalties for defamation but also banned materials that threatened its safety. Because of these two provisions, thus, human right activists remained critical. Despite the letter of the law, however, the state’s reactions towards critical voices remained very strong. Following the 2005 election, the state also pursued cracking down on journalists, and the result was the closure of many private newspapers and magazines.

Related to the 2008 proclamation is the July 2007 broadcasting proclamation. Two provisions were particularly significant to the Ethiopian Muslim communities. Article 23 (2) clearly prohibited the right of foreigners to secure a broadcasting license. Besides restricting a broadcasting license only to the Ethiopians, the law also stipulated that foreign capital is not allowed. Article 23 (5) also prohibits the right of religious organizations to secure a broadcasting license. The implications of the above clauses for the Muslim communities were to push aside the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora, which desired to play an increased role. It also somehow implied that the EPRDF viewed the religious sector as a source of strife and conflict (Teshome Bahiru Wondwosen, 2009, pp. 91-94).

The NGO Law

The newly enacted NGO law, which took effect in 2009, created unprecedented debate both at home and abroad. Parties who have discussed the issue range from locals to international bodies. The contentions were from various angles, but three of them are the most important. First, the contention was about the way by which the proclamation determines an association’s legal status based on the citizenship of its founder. Second, the legal classification of the status of a charity or civil society based on its source of finance was also another point of the debate. Third, the implication of the new legal classification in constraining the activities of civic organization was another point of controversy.

To the state, however, the overall issue behind the debate is ideological and a desire of the West to maintain command in national politics through the invisible hands of international NGOs. Thus, the question of NGOs was a debate about appropriate political ideology in Ethiopia. The state construed the debate as one between the ideologies of neo-liberalism of the West vs. the developmental state ideology of Ethiopia. The state thus reasoned in line with the developmental state ideology that the empowerment of the state as a lead actor in the development process of the
nation was mandatory. NGOs’ role was secondary and had to be limited in comparison to the role of the state. For critics of the state, however, the overall endeavor was a systematic way of silencing the possibility of future dissent from the international community via development agencies that they finance.

Notwithstanding the arguments of the critics, I should also note that the period brought a lot of restructuring through a re-engineering of the business processes of public organizations. Thus, in one way besides the likelihood of its linkage with the 2005 election, the endeavor was also part of the reform program of the state. This is not to deny that the proclamations’ intent also included attempts to curb the influences of NGOs in the political sphere. Indeed, in a way, the proclamations were clear manifestations that the state’s attitude towards them had reached its apex since they became part of a process that challenged the supremacy of the EPRDF. Indeed, in the 2005 incidents, charitable organizations participated in the election process, especially through reporting on its unfair practices. There were also some debates on whether the issuance of such proclamations was constitutional or not.

The enactment of the Charities and Societies Proclamation brought a significant change in the way in which charities and civil societies operate. The proclamation uses the term charities and civil societies instead of NGO. It makes no distinction between charities and civil societies, which broadly are understood in terms of their objective – the former is targeting the public while the latter only its members. According to the proclamation, there are three legal statuses of NGOs. Ethiopian Charities are NGOs established by Ethiopians in accordance with Ethiopian law and do not receive more than 10% of their income from abroad. Ethiopian Resident Charities are similar to Ethiopian charities but can receive more than 10% of their income from abroad. Foreign Charities’ founding members can include foreign nationals; their formation also can be based upon foreign law and receive funds from foreign sources.

Establishing Ethiopian charities thus became a right of Ethiopians only. The jurisdiction of these societies is very wide and it includes political participation. In contrast, however, the proclamation relegates the participation of Ethiopian Resident and Foreign Charities to social and economic development and environmental protection. The new law interpreted the issue of human rights and its advocacy as a political activity and thus excluded it from the purview of charitable organizations. The implication of the distinction between Ethiopian Charities, on the one hand, and Resident and Foreign Charities, on the other hand, is profound. In the first category, the right is exclusively restricted to citizens, while in the second one it is not a right but rather a gracious opportunity that is granted. Thus, in cases of Resident and Foreign Charities the state holds the right to revoke the license as it sees fit. The Resident and Foreign Charities’ vulnerability is further evident when one
knows that the appropriate executive of the civil societies registration office makes the final decision, which they cannot even appeal in court.

The implication of this law for Islamic charities who are operating within Ethiopia and the Diaspora communities was profound. Bader and other Islamic associations established in foreign lands lost the opportunity to participate in human rights advocacy. The new law banned any kind of advocacy from the activities of international NGOs. More than that, those charities who raise more than 10% of their income from outside sources cannot participate at all in the area of promoting religious equality. One could note that the proclamation of this sort successfully abates similar rights-based requests from the Muslim Diaspora. Like any other NGOs, Islamic NGOs have to choose now between being an Ethiopian Charity or not. The choice is not, however, without a cost. With a determination to be an Ethiopian Charity, the new law permits the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora to engage in rights-based activism, but doing so curtails the potential sources of finance. On the other hand, choosing to be an Ethiopian Resident Charity or a Foreign Charity enables them to secure better financing from abroad but puts an end the ambition of participating in activism for rights, besides the danger of closure whenever the state sees fit.

The two choices seem to be unattractive to the Diaspora communities. Registering as an Ethiopian NGO obviously precludes the possibility of running the organization from abroad. It also creates a constraint for resources marshaled. Registering as an Ethiopian Resident or Foreign Charity also does not help much of the causes they aspire to advance. The Diaspora Muslim communities advocate Islam as an all-encompassing system where the spiritual and the secular life of the Muslim community cannot be separated. This does not mean that they advocate for Islamic religious precepts to be totalitarian narratives that govern Muslims and Christians alike. What they advocate is the implementation of Islamic laws among the Muslim communities and the governing of the public space in light of secular principles that respect the diverse expression of religions. It is no wonder that there is a consensus among the Muslim Diaspora in rejection of the new Charities and Societies Proclamation. The perception is that the law frustrated the desire to participate actively in the life of Ethiopian communities at home.

**The Anti-terrorism Law**

The 2009 anti-terrorism law also spurred a lot of debate both at the draft stage and after its promulgation as law. President Girma Wolde-Giorgis said at the opening of the House of Federation and the House of People’s Representatives on October 9, 2006 that proclamations related to terrorism would be tabled and adopted (W.-G. Girma, 2006). When the law finally passed in 2009, it secured 286 votes in favor, 91 against, and one abstention.
The 2015 report of Human Rights Watch (2015, p. 22) infamously refers to the law as “Ethiopia’s deeply flawed anti-terrorism law.” The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) (2013) has a similar take on the antiterrorism law. It states, “Ethiopia passed new anti-terrorism legislation that includes ambiguous language that could permit a journalist to be jailed for anything from covering a protest to working with a foreign news service.” The Unity for Democracy and Justice Party (UDJ) also called for collecting petitions against the anti-terrorism law because the law is against the rights of association, religious freedom, and the free administration of religious organizations. Blue Party also staged a protest against the same law (Soi, 2013).

There are reports that Muslims opposing state policies they saw as curtailing religious freedom detained a journalist on anti-terrorism charges after covering a protest. In Ethiopia, the authorities arrested Yusuf Getachew, editor of the ወጉዳይ (Muslim Affairs), and suspended three Muslim news outlets in August after they covered protests opposing policies that Muslims said were interfering with their religious institutions (CPJ, 2013). Another effective tool of the state to persecute critical reporting by journalists became the 2009 Anti-terrorism Proclamation (Skjerdal, 2015, pp. 79-80).

7.2.9 Conclusion

In the second half of the 2000s, the EIASC became the official representative of the Muslim communities. The official status, however, did not enable it to control developments within the Muslim communities. In fact, during this period, mosques remained competitive spaces between young imams with Salafi-Wahhabi orientations and elderly imams that espoused Sufism. The newly trained imams increasingly continued to expand their horizons of influence via building new mosques and replacing the older imams. There was also an unsuccessful effort from the Diaspora Muslim communities to influence the Ethiopian state. Central to the discussion of the Diaspora delegates and the state was the role of the EIASC. The attempt of the delegates to discredit the EIASC did not come to fruition. The short-lived success in creating a peaceful dialogue between the Salafi-Wahhabi `ulama and the Sufi `ulama also came to an abrupt end as the February 2009 appointment removed the Addis AAIAASC leaders that hosted the discussion.

The second period of the post-2001 period was characterized by more interreligious clashes than in the previous years, especially in the southwestern Oromia region. The approach of the state during this period was the mobilization of interfaith joint commissions in order not to precipitate revenge where Christians are the majority. Thus, the state strictly monitored the circulation of footage of massacres with the fear that it might provoke interreligious conflict. In general, the state suppressed the news in case it might result in vengeance from the other religious communities. NGOs in
collaboration with federal and newly installed local state officials took the initiative to formulate frameworks for healthy dialogue aimed at reconciliation.

It was during this period also that the Ethiopian state started to produce policy documents and strengthen various legal frameworks. The Ethiopian foreign policy document articulated that Islamic radicalism is a threat from the neighboring Muslim countries and from the Middle East, and the state’s allegiance to the West was to combat such a threat. Following the 2005 competitive election, the state also narrowed the political space and rendered inept those opposition parties that joined the Parliament via newly issued parliamentary regulations. With the hope of quelling future dissent, the state presented proclamations that fueled debates both in Ethiopia and abroad. The 2008 media law, even if it improved much of the criticism of the 1992 press law, encouraged self-censorship by fear of intimidation. The 2009 terrorism law, which had broader provisions, also provided a license to the state to suppress critical voices. The 2008 charity proclamation similarly limited the advocacy role of international right groups in Ethiopia and limited the financial capacities of local NGOs to participate in the same rights activities.

**7.3 Domestication (2009-Present): A Preemptive Measure**

In the following sub-section, I argue that the Ethiopian state’s approach towards Islam is to domesticate Islam. The approach of the state has been approving what it thought was moderate Islam and rejecting what it perceived as the extremist version. In practice, such a policy turned into promoting the Ethiopian Sufi Sunni interpretation of Islam, co-opting the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam, and rejecting the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam.

In order to establish my domestication thesis, I begin by depicting how the state problematized religious conflicts as security issues (7.3.1) and viewed the way forward to contain them by the promotion of moderate Islam. The joining of the EIASC, the state, and Al-Ahbash backfired as periodic mass demonstrations and protests successfully mobilized dissent, mainly from the youth (7.3.2). I also look the instrumentality of the state’s own media to discredit the dissidents’ religious interference narrative and positively depict the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam (7.3.3). The state media painted the dissidents as intolerant radical Muslims that subvert the constitutional ethos (7.3.4), extremists that disturb the culture (7.3.5), a threat to the religious diversity (7.3.6), agents conspiring with the enemies of the nation (7.3.7), and an attempt of Islamic terror (7.3.8). In contrast to the state media, I also show that the private media presented the overall stance of the state as that of religious interference (7.3.9).
7.3.1 Religious conflicts as security issues

The year 2009 marked another detour in the state policy towards Islam. The state began taking matters into its own hands. The new policy direction was a pre-emptive measure and resulted in restructuring within the state. The issuance of proclamation No. 641/2009 brought religions and faith affairs under the purview of a separate directorate within MoFA (Ministry of Federal Affairs). This indicated the EPRDF has renewed attention to relations with the religious sector. MoFA’s establishment dates back to 2001, following the dismantlement of its predecessor, the Office for Regional Affairs (ORA). The overall purpose of the religious affairs section of the ministry is to maintain sustainable peace and security by ensuring tolerance and understanding among different religions to align them with the overall development of the country. Proclamation No. 691/2010 further empowered the ministry, as the registration of charities and societies and possessions falls under its authority. The Federal Prison Administration (FPA) and Ethiopian Federal Police Commission (EFPC) also fall under the ministry.

In line with the newly assigned roles, MoFA started to take steps. On February 16-17 and April 23-24 of 2009, MoFA held a forum with representatives from local government, security bureaus, and policy commissions concerning religious conflicts and resolving sectarian conflicts within them. The targeted audiences indicate that the conception of interreligious and intra-religious conflicts was in light of peace and security. The direction was new from the previous period, which had emphasized building communities’ resilience through the representatives of the religious institutions. Now it had become a national security issue. The consultations also indicate that the state envisioned a nationwide consensus among the federal and regional government officials. The national consensus was important, given that the religious sector accused officials of exercising religious partisanship, favoring one’s own religion over the others in exercising official duties.

On March 31, 2009, Addis Ababa City Administration’s Information and Public Relations department also conducted a training session to prevent interreligious conflict. The training in Addis Ababa clearly followed the religious tension between Christians and Muslims in the celebration of the Epiphany of the same year. In the celebration, Ethiopian Orthodox adherents asserted that Ethiopia is a Christian land by wearing t-shirts with the slogan, “Ethiopia, a Christian Island.” The immediate cause of resentment for some youth in the celebration was linked to the incident of October 10, 2008. A young Muslim entered the compound of Genet Tsige Menagesha Cathedral by St. George in the Arada sub-city of Addis Ababa and chanted repeatedly “Allah Akbar.” The date was Sunday, about 8 AM; he continued chanting until his forced removal by police officers. News of this and similar incident traveled fast throughout the religious communities, creating a sense of being under attack.
Following the Epiphany celebration, on January 19, 2009, MoFA made a general statement that condemned the inappropriateness of entering the compound of others to perform one’s own religious duties. The generality of the statement, as if Christians also made similar attempts, spurred the synod of the EOTC to write a dissent to MoFA. In February 2009, when addressing the Ethiopian Parliament, Meles Zenawi made a similar general statement about religious radicalism and painted the whole endeavor as an action motivated by pecuniary gain. The public recognition of the religious landscape as a potential source of conflict was thus a step forward. Following that, the state launched countrywide training.

Through November 2009 to March 2010, the state conducted training about religious freedom in light of constitutional provisions. The overall purpose was to put an end to the partisan approach of civil servants in favoring their own religions over the others. There were fewer incidents of interreligious conflicts that were not as organized as the previous periods, and in these few cases the state’s responses were relatively swift (USDOS, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013). In September 2010, the EPRDF also introduced the consolidated draft report of an ambitious growth and transformation plan (GTP). In the draft, religious issues were part of the justice sector reforms, more specifically under the caption of strengthening the federal system. MoFA envisioned enhancing the values of tolerance and respect between religious institutions and their followers. The draft document also suggested a research-based or scientific approach-based identification of areas that are susceptible to religious conflicts and the subsequent resolutions. The overall effort was to create a conducive environment for the religious sector where there can be lasting peace and respect between adherents of diverse adherents of religious faith (MoFED, 2010, pp. 62-66).

Recognizing that religious diversity is in the very fabric of Ethiopian culture, the promotion of interreligious dialogue was also brought under the responsibilities of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MoCT) in order to enhance mutual understanding and development (MoFED, 2010, p. 75). The final GTP policy matrix also similarly put forth the preparation of studies, a legal framework, and directives on religious affairs as a task that had begun and would continue throughout the 5-year plan (MoFED, 2010, p. 24). The participation of state officials in the June 2011 training program in Harar city, however, resulted in a vigorous reaction against the state and the EIASC.

7.3.2 The genesis of public protest

The end of 2011 marked the height of the growing dissent among Ethiopian Muslims. The event began as an Arabic department student demonstration at Awalia Muslim Mission School (AMMS), and from there it spread throughout the nation. At the onset, the opposition primarily targeted the actions of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) leaders. Later developments, however, framed the secular state as a major architect of a nefarious scheme plotted against Islam
and the EIASC as the main apparatus. The conflation of the EIASC, a religious institution, and the secular state as common objects of opposition derived from a perception that the former had become state machinery. In the state’s discourse, interference had become the central theme.

The movement was no longer sporadic but rather an organized one led by a committee with 17 members. Most of the dissidents’ representative committee members are in their 30s. With the exception of a few, most of them are popular preachers among the Muslim communities, earn their own private income either as employees of Muslim NGOs or doing their own business, have secular education training, and studied religious education at various levels. The committee submitted three requests. The requests were: (1) for the dismissal of EIASC leadership and a subsequent election involving the active participation of the Muslim communities; (2) for the state to stop interfering in religious affairs and forcibly imposing Al-Ahbash; and (3) for the state to hand over the administration of AMMS to an independent board drawn from the Muslim communities.

The Al-Ahbash doctrine is an Islamic reform movement that originated in Harar but expanded to Lebanon. The interpretation also opposes the Wahhabi form of interpretation of Islam and rejects violence as a means of advancing one’s cause. The support of the state towards this ideology is very subtle. The state depicts its presence in EIASC-organized seminars as honored guests. In fact, the explicit role played in the training was not more than the exposition of the constitutional clauses. Without a doubt, state officials and EIASC leaders praised the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam; more specifically, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi depicted the leader of the organization in a positive light, as a man who championed the religious tolerance culture of Ethiopia to the world. The state, however, staunchly denies that it is urging the acceptance of Al-Ahbash in the wider community, but many Muslims do not accept the denial.

Based on the anti-terror law enacted in 2009, which gave a broad definition of terrorism and provided the regime with extensive power to counteract any terror movements at its own discretion, the state did not tolerate the public activism more than six months. Following the failures of negotiation between the dissidents’ representatives and the state, the state charged the leaders with attempted terrorism, conspiracy, and incitement. The state also not only produced documentaries linking the activists with terrorism but also broadcasted them in the state-controlled media. In the documentaries and various public announcements, the Ethiopian state continued to label the request as extremism and the protest movement leaders as having a disguised a political agenda. The following section looks at these documentaries and the remarks of the late Meles Zenawi. In doing so, the section also attempts to document the reactions. In a way, the section provides evidence that EPRDF-backed preemptive measures of the EIASC did not achieve their goal.
7.3.3 State media

In the pre-2012 period, religious radicalism and extremism issues were rarely reported in the state-controlled media. The only exceptions to this trend were the 2006 violent incidents of intra-religious conflicts, incidents surrounding the 2009 celebration of Epiphany, and the 2011 burning of the churches that triggered the displacement of Christians. Even in these three cases, the state made only very brief statements. In fact, in all of the above incidents, the state strictly controlled and securitized the dissemination to ward off possible acts of revenge and retaliation from Christian circles.

Episodes of interreligious and intra-religious conflicts and tensions thus remained largely unpublicized and beyond the reach of the public. The private print media also avoided providing detailed accounts out of fear that such action would trigger stringent monitoring and harassment from the state. Notwithstanding the presumption, the strict control of the media and lack of transparency in reporting hatched rumors that were exaggerations and at times not true. The failure to foster transparent spaces for religious adherents to discuss the matters and weigh the evidence thus contributed negatively to the malleability of the memories. In discussions with Christians on the issue of religious radicalism, these incidents consistently emerge as evidence.

The overall approach and perception of the state towards the media and the public were also cynical. To the state, the media do not have the sensitivity and integrity required for professional investigative reporting. The state’s perception of the religious sector was also as vulnerable consumers susceptible to subversive information. Consequently, the state demanded that the media not get involved in “sensitive issues” to avoid fueling the tension. Notwithstanding the intentions of the state, the fact that the issues remained unmentioned did a great disservice to the way Christians look at any kind of Islamic revival and activism. The incidents at the end of 2011, however, changed the approach of the state in reporting.

The protest movement of Ethiopian Muslims at AMMS changed the overall approach of the state media. The effective use of modern information technology and the Internet to disseminate the voices of dissent from the Muslim communities inevitably required a different approach in order to curb the mounting religious tension and activism. As the protests continued to accuse the state of religious interference, the state-controlled media increasingly became a means of indoctrination against the protesters.

At the beginning, as the state continued in its dialogue with the dissidents’ representative committee, the state media’s tone was not that negative. The state media appreciated the overall approach the dissidents took and the legitimacy of their questions. Following the committee’s refusal to accept the proposed solutions, however, the state media’s approach reversed, becoming diametrically opposite to its previous stance. The overall approach of the media became that of
discrediting voices of dissent. To counter the state’s narrative, the existing handful of Islamic print media took the lead in reporting on the incidents. The reporting on the protest movement by the state media, albeit in a negative light, led to the inclusion of the issue of religious radicalism and extremism as well as state interference in the private media, a handful of independent magazines, and the newspapers that remained in circulation. As is usually the case, the images of the private media were diametrically opposite to the state’s narrative.

The sympathy of the private media towards the protest movement was evident. With few exceptions, most of the private media’s analysis and critical writings were from Muslim journalists and supporters of the protest movement. Some neutral observers also occasionally wrote about it. There was, however, a clear difference between the two types of reporting. For non-Muslim journalists, the overall affair was not unique. It was similar to what the state had been doing with the EOTC, to weaken the unity of the religious adherents in order to prolong its power. For Muslim journalists, the depiction was of the intent to destroy Islam via a pretext of religious radicalism and an extremism narrative. The rhetoric of the protest movement partly explains the predominance of Muslim journalists in the private media. The protesters framed the overall affair in terms of religious interference. The narratives that countered the state media required journalists well versed in Islamic religious precepts, and Muslim journalists filled the void in the private media’s competency on matters of Islam.

The protest also occasioned the closure and the establishment of Islamic media, the latter in an online context. With the exception of TV Africa and Radio Najashi, which existed before the present protest movement, all the other radio stations were established after the religious tension mounted. The popularity of videos and radio stations derived from the fact that the literacy rate is very low in Ethiopia and the culture of the society is oral. There were also new websites and social media created for the advancement of the protesters’ causes. In the following sections, the two competing media narratives are set forth. In depicting the state media narrative, the main sources were Meles Zenawi’s speech in the Parliament, various statements issued by MoFA, panel discussions organized by the state media, and various documentaries prepared and aired by Ethiopian Television (ETV). In the subsequent section, the narrative of Muslim protesters follows.

**7.3.4 Meles Zenawi’s parliamentary remarks: A tolerant culture and a secular constitution threatened**

Central to the religious extremism discourse of the state lie the late prime minister’s remarks of April 12, 2012 (ETV, 2012b). Owing to the fact that the remarks generated a strong reaction among Muslim protesters and set a negative tone for future state remarks, an extended discussion follows. In a way, his stance on the matter was not that different from various statements issued by MoFA
officials. What made it significant is probably the impression that with his remarks the last hope of the Muslim communities might have withered, sealing their petitions irreversibly due to his influence.

At the time of Meles’ speech, the protest movement was a four-month-old phenomenon largely contained within the compound of AMMS. The protest was well organized and there was a lot of enthusiasm among the participants. The protest movement had already elected its leaders and clearly articulated specific questions. State officials of various levels were also in dialogues with the protest movement leaders. The issue had also grabbed the attention of the media, both state and private, even if the two were polarized. From the state side, it became abundantly clear that the initial hope that it would subside in the near future was fading away. The parliamentary remark of Meles Zenawi was not a formal report on the growing tension between the state and some Muslims. In principle and inferring from previous practices, there was a necessity to address the issue since it had become a concern of many and grabbed the attention of the media. Meles, however, left it out from his report, probably to create an impression that the issue was a question of a few and its political significance was minimal.

Given that the regular parliamentary session was still an appropriate occasion to address it, one of the EPRDF members posed the question. Taking the occasion as an opportunity, the prime minister explained the matter in a little more than 17 minutes. The structured nature of Meles’ speech creates an impression that the response was not instantaneous. Meles took the first minute to lay down constitutional principles that he later used to gauge the matter at hand. He also talked about religious extremism among EOTC adherents for a couple of minutes, probably to give an impression that the extremism tendency is a phenomenon of all religions and Islam is not the target. The remaining 14 minutes was wholeheartedly committed to expounding on religious radicalism among the Muslim communities.

In his remarks, Meles briefly explained constitutional provisions related to religion. His exposition of the constitution presented three criteria, namely the separation of the state from religion, freedom of religion, and the responsibility to defend the provisions of the constitution. The separation of the state from religion highlighted two directions. First, he explained the impossibility of establishing a religious state given the present constitution. Thus, he reasoned that there could not be a Christian, Islamic, or Wake feta (a traditional religion of the Oromo people group) state. Second, the spheres of influence of religion and state are different, and one should not interfere with the space of the others. Related to this, he highlighted how the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and anyone is at liberty to choose and pursue his or her chosen beliefs.

The final established criterion was the responsibility of the state and the citizens in relation to the constitution; both the citizens and the state not only should respect these constitutional rights but
also promote them. In a way, the overall tone was set by the constitution. His intended impression was that the EPRDF’s concern regarding religious radicalism derives from ensuring constitutional provisions, while the intentions of the radicals are to subvert constitutional clauses. The remarks were typical rhetoric in which the state presents violations of rights as if they were responsible measures of the state to guard the ethos of the constitution that the prime minister outlined and to ensure that law and order prevail.

Once the exposition of the constitutional clauses was completed, Meles highlighted extremities within the EOTC. He reminded Parliament that there were people who wore t-shirts that say, “One nation, and one religion,” with an ambition to establish a Christian state. In the 2009 celebration of Epiphany, EOTC adherents wore t-shirts imprinted with “Ethiopia is a Christian land.” He even named some Mehabire Kidusan members, an association under the purview of the EOTC, pursuing such an agenda. The overall effort was clearly an attempt to create an impression that the state is not equating religious radicalism with Islam.

The accused association places a high value on the traditions of the EOTC, which symbiotically related to the monarchical regimes that promoted patriotic kinds of nationalism, in contrast with the EPRDF’s ethnic-based nationalism. Thus, for the state, some of the association members signified a residual trace of the monarchical states. Following his remarks of a radicalistic tendency in Christianity, he qualified its nature. The first qualification was its cause; he said the radicalistic tendency mainly comes from ignorance and is correctable through constitutional awareness. The second qualification is related to the magnitude of religious radicalism, the radicalism in Christianity presented as lesser. The two qualifications indicate that Christian radicalism tendencies are very few and they do not derive from religious precepts.

Meles’ remark about Islamic extremism followed a different pattern. He characterized Ethiopian indigenous Islam as 100% Sufi Sunni Muslims, with no Shia Muslims. In his speech, the present-day Salafis were thus new developments within the last 20 and 30 years. After implicitly making a distinction between indigenous Islam and foreign-inspired Islam, a religious tolerance discourse followed. Probably intentionally, the prime minister used the word Sufis rather than Muslims while connoting the old, beautiful culture of tolerance many aspire to emulate. From his description, evidently there was a positive bias towards Sufis and a negative stance towards Salafis.

In this embellished historical depiction, he systematically unpacked the EPRDF’s understanding of the Ethiopian past, which resonated with the delicate collective memory of Ethiopian Muslims. Thus, the tolerance narrative of the past contrasted the religious and the political systems. The latter’s policy was described as “a discriminative policy,” while the religious traditions of Christian and Muslim relations embodied religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence that could be set as the example to the whole world.
To explain religious tolerance, the story he took was from the Wällo area. In fact, he also used Harar in his February 2009 speech as an example of tolerance. In this case, he himself recognized the example might be atypical. The recognition that the example is atypical indicated that religious boundary demarcations were increasingly becoming firm. The selection clearly indicated intentionality. First, the incident took place in Wällo, an area that has a reputation for producing Islamic scholars. The implication is that the Ethiopian Muslim scholars always embraced the Christians as fellow pilgrims and the recent antagonism towards other religions is foreign.

Second, the example points to both otherness and closeness. In a way, it indicates that historic Ethiopian Islam did not interpret religious differences as irreconcilable and mutually exclusive. Thus, his story was a blow against the newly breeding competitive spirit of religious fundamentalism among the religions. More specifically, the moral significance of the story was to discredit the Salafis’ teachings that emphasize a competitive spirit rather than a spirit of cooperation with other religions. The story indicated the overall criteria of state in classifying a religious movement as radical. To the state, a movement is radical if it expands the rift between members of its own religion and other religions.

His discourse about Salafis took, however, a completely different approach than the Sufi. His depictions of Salafis were continually in contradistinction with Sufi and mostly in a negative sense, with a qualification that the radical designation does not refer to all Salafis. He also associated them with Al-Qaeda. His speech associated Salafis with radicals based on their shared ideology and their actual practices. First, probably most importantly the link was ideological. The link was to discredit the Salafis by pointing that they share the same extremist ideological root.

The ideological linkage fed the suspicion that the difference was only a matter of time and the movement would eventually mature into Al-Qaeda. Second, his speech also claimed an actual linkage between the two. In line with the second aspect, the prime minister remarked, “In Ethiopia also, the first time in history, Al-Qaeda cells have been found, mostly in Bale and Arsi. All of its members were Salafis. This does not mean, however, all Salafis in Ethiopia are Al-Qaeda. The majority of them are not.” His discussion also provides an interesting insight into labeling. Before 2001, the term Wahhabism had a prerogative connotation of those who are critical of radicalism tendencies in Islam. The term in Ethiopia generally connoted extremism tendencies in Islam. Over time, however, popular preachers refuted that there was a sect called Wahhabism in Islam. Thus, they claimed, whoever used Wahhabism in the discourse was creating an “imaginary figure” as a surrogate to attack Islam.

Taking into account this new dynamic of labeling, Meles recognized that the Wahhabism designation might not be appropriate. His remark was not incidental but rather a response to a popular accusation against the state. Protecting themselves from the general pejorative associations
related to the term and the promotion of the first three generations of Islam as pious models, the new preferred self-designation was Salafi. His remark was thus a refutation of the opposition by indicating that the difference is more of a semantic nuance than one of substance. In order to maintain the negative connotation, however, the state media used a hyphenated description, the Salafi-Wahhabi radicals. The implication is that whatever is said of Wahhabi also applies to Salafis.

Implicating the Salafis as radicals to the public, however, required more explicit criteria than a conceptual distinction of Sufi and Salafis. In doing so, he appealed to sensitive issues, the national census and the Ethiopian culture, of which most Salafis are critical. Unlike the 1997 official census, there was a contest about the 2007 national census of the Central Statistical Authority (CSA) on the grounds of religious affiliation and ethnicity. Muslims generally hold the opinion that the census underestimated the actual number. Meles linked the verifiable actual claim of understatement as an advance preparatory step for the demand of establishing an Islamic state.

The second remark was in relation to maintaining the historic cordial relationship between the two faith communities. Meles emphasized that Salafis not only condemn but also actively work to destroy the existing religious tolerance. Meles also cited the youth as the most vulnerable and susceptible audiences, who fall victim due to ignorance of constitutional provisions. He also added, “It is only a few who are being paid.” He did not elaborate on the last point but one would infer that the foreign characterization of Salafis implies that the financiers are external to the nation.

In analyzing the future courses of such a perspective, Meles further linked it to the Arab Spring uprising. He mentioned the havoc in Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Libya. He also gave an example from Egypt because Ethiopians generally have an interest in the nation. He specifically indicated that Salafis, a party called Al-Nur, won 24% of the parliamentary seats and the chaos of that had not yet resolved after the spring. Thus, he reasoned that the present movement has to be put to an end while it is still immature. He has also claimed that the recent uprising in the Arab world inspired the demonstrators and a few more were disappointed for various reasons like tax, land, the prevailing competition, and so on. In a sense, then, the overall discourse was a warning that the protesters should not clash with the constitution, and that they have to respect the rule of the land and realize that religion and the state are separate.

Towards the end, he also refuted the claim that the state had brought in “a sect” called Al-Ahbash. In the defense of the state, he made two important distinctions. First, he pointed that the conflation of the actions of EIASC leaders with the state was inaccurate and it derived only because both participated in the same event. According to him, in all the training conducted, the state officials were only invited guests entrusted to conduct a portion of the program. According to him, their role was to provide awareness of the constitution, which of course is the right of the state. The setting of
the direction and content of the remaining program, which relates to religious knowledge, was the responsibility of the EIASC, about which the state has neither the expertise nor a constitutional base. Second, in his response, he emphasized the Ethiopians of Al-Ahbash over and above the Salafis. In doing so, however, he repeatedly claimed that his information came from those who claim that they do possess knowledge concerning their religion. Here it was obvious that the presentation of the Al-Ahbash sect was favorable in light of the designations of Salafis. The Al-Ahbash origin via its founder is Harar and its expansion abroad adds to the reputation of the founder as a scholar in the Muslim world.

In later discourses that followed, Muslim protesters interpreted Salafis and Sufis as designations intended to create a division among the Muslim communities. As a result, later demonstrations added a slogan saying, “Muslim is one.” The other contentious point was his remark about radicalization signs. Protesters have argued that claiming the Muslim population was understated in the census does not imply radicalism. In their defense, they have mingled their narrative with the contentious 2007 census announcement that spurred a discussion of Amhara’s underrepresentation in the census. In defense of the promotion of Christian-Muslim relations, they have posted in social media video clips the protesters designating Christians as “Our brothers” and openly announcing that Sharia is not their request.

One might note that the three questions asked by Muslim protesters were set aside, and no attempt was made to make a remark. Thus, Mele’s approach was rhetorical, with the intention of discrediting the claim of the protesters rather than actually engaging with the questions. Part of his negative stance towards Salafi-Wahhabis derived from the US designation. Probably Ethiopia’s engagements in Somalia also contributed to such an assessment. It has been noted by some researchers that the funding of religious and/or religious-based education by Arab/Islamic charities emerged as a major vehicle for channeling what are identified as Wahhabi-Salafi expressions of Islamic fundamentalism and jihadist tendencies in Somalia (Jhazbhay, 2008, p. 175).

7.3.5 State training materials: The discourse of religious extremism

A closer observation of the EPRDF’s religious extremism discourse within the training materials indicates that the overall discussion is framed in terms of the role of the state in promoting development, good governance, and democracy. Religious extremism is thus a threat to peace and stability that indirectly sterilizes, belittles, and fragments the concerted effort of the people against the battle waged on poverty and backwardness. As a result, religious extremism continues to be a threat as long as the country’s development, good governance, and democracy-building efforts are incomplete. In assessing the citizens’ religious history, the state does not deny that there were historical injustices in the name of religion. In its assessment, however, it frames all of them as
political matters disguised in religion that were in substance conflicts over power, ambition over the expansion of territory, and supremacy over international trade routes.

The history of Ethiopia’s citizens was painted colorfully, exhibiting religious cooperation, respect, and tolerance. The related values were also forgiveness, justice, and peace. The cohesiveness of the society was also quite evident in the way they interacted with each other. The religious adherents had celebrated holidays together, protected the other from the enemy, and interrelated through marriage and ancient methods of conflict resolutions. Most of all, the scriptures and the traditions of these religions are anti-extremist in the sense that they promote peace, patience, and love. They also unequivocally condemn any effort to attack the other, forced conversion, and unfair criticism. From the various state training materials, it is evident that in the fight against extremism neither the religion nor its adherents are candidates that require purging, but rather readily available partners.

In light of such an assessment, the state defines its role in combating terrorism. In this regard, it repeatedly asserted that its role emanates from a constitutional mandate, the embodiment of the wishes of the people. Religious extremism was characterized as anti-peace, development, and democracy. By derivation, it is also anti-constitutional. More specifically, an effort of religious extremism is against constitutional values of equality of religions, freedom of belief, and the separation of state and religion. Religious extremism in principle is thus against such noble values. In such instances, then, the state cannot look passively but rather must unplug its source, which would of course require disestablishing its network and all forms of its activity.

The EPRDF uses religious extremism and religious radicalism interchangeably. It, however, makes a distinction between Atibakinet and terrorism. Atibakinet is a strict adherence to one’s fundamental religious precepts. It is a strict commitment to one’s religion and an accompanying persistent effort to practice the set of religious precepts conveyed in it. Such efforts are usually inward and do not put pressure upon others. In contrast to Atibakinet, radicalism is a disguised agenda. Radical religious precepts/thoughts selectively nurture among adherents a mindset that encourages them to denounce other religions, instigate violence, and subvert the constitutional order. Thus, the concept of radicalism is a direct antithesis of the constitution. Unlike the constitution, which grants religious freedom and equality, it attempts to implement religious supremacy through the implementation of a state religion or religious state, and it attempts to infect education with religious influence.

The EPRDF points that due to the nation’s geopolitical imperative, various global forces that compete for supremacy intend to use Ethiopia as a hub for disseminating their ideology through East Africa and eventually to Africa in general. The battle in Ethiopia is one of foreign nations attempting to establish the absolute hegemony of Christianity and Islam in the region. The implication of such a
depiction is that the overall religious problems do not reflect the reality from within but rather imported from outside Ethiopia.

7.3.6 Many religions, one nation documentary: Radicalism as threat to religious diversity

A documentary titled Many religions, one nation was the first documentary dealing with the protests and was aired on July 2, 2012 (ETV, 2012c). Produced by ETV, it was the longest on the subject, lasting 75 minutes. As the first documentary, its significance was higher. It set a direction for the state’s narrative. At the time of its release, the six-month-old protest movement’s momentum increased intensely. The state’s initial stance of ambivalence and openness to dialogue also ended. In fact, the state-controlled media had already classified the movement as illegal. Once this aired, however, it spurred many discussions. The adherents of the EOTC and Islam expressed concern. Evangelicals and Catholics did not show any reaction, given that both were barely represented in the documentary. It was within the same month that the state detained the movement leaders. The following paragraphs discuss the content of the documentary and the reactions that followed.

The documentary structure was in four parts. It had an introduction, a section summarizing Ethiopian history, a survey of the present conditions, and concluding remarks. The introduction and the concluding remarks were the shortest parts, together accounting for less than 10%. As for the rest of the documentary, one-third of it was about Ethiopian history and the remaining was the assessment of the contemporary situation. The introductory section tapped into a thesis of historic peaceful coexistence and lamented that there are signs that threaten it.

In the historical review section, as evident from the commentary of the narrator, without denying a few positive elements the depiction of the past was negative. The narration divided history into distinct political and social history. The overall comment could be summed up as asserting that the culture of the leaders and the people were diametrically opposite, the latter characterized by peaceful coexistence while the earlier as subjugating. The interviewees also made a similar distinction, except for Ahmedin, an Islamic activist who later became the public relations head of the dissenting Muslim community and one of the 17 member leaders. To him, not only did the political and the social history overlap but also the primary characterization of Ethiopian history was of war and dominance, not peace and tolerance. Even if he is clearly an outlier from the narrative frame, his position probably better represents the present protest movement. His popular-level history book was an instant celebrity among Muslims and the honored designation before his name became “the history scholar.”

The few positive comments in the documentary were about the society, and the negative ones were about the previous states. Interestingly enough, with the exception of one, the speakers were all Muslims. I do not think this is an accident since the EOTC does not subscribe to the EPRDF’s
version of Ethiopia’s past. The differing of opinion between the EPRDF and the EOTC is also clear if one carefully follows the comments of the narrator. The commentator commented on the religious traditions, more specifically the traditions of the EOTC. He asserted that Abraham was the common ancestor of the three religions, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He also set the Middle East as the origin of the three religions. The effort was to create a common ground among the religions, even if no one followed his line of reasoning.

The foreign origin designation of the EOTC also did not get much support. According to one Diyaqn (a religious clergy), it was not by following Jews that the nation believed in God. In fact, to him, following the EOTC’s tradition, Ethiopia preceded even Abraham, since the biblical figure Melchizedek was an Ethiopian. Thus, Ethiopians had the conception of the true God before the Old Testament. For the historians and Muslims, however, the EOTC’s rejection of foreignness was unacceptable. No one, however, contested the foreign origin of Islam. In fact, Muslims proudly indicated that Ethiopia was the nation that accepted the first Muslim refugees and the whole world is in debt to this very generous act. The acceptance of the foreign origin of Islam, however, does not indicate that Ethiopian Muslims show more critical distance towards religious traditions than EOTC adherents do. The acceptance of the foreign origin of Islam and the rejection of the foreign origin of the EOTC arose from the same sources, uncritical commitment and allegiance to the respective religious traditions.

The religious conversion story of Al-Najāshī provides additional evidence for this proposal. Generally, Ethiopian Christians reject his conversion while Muslims accept it, based on their respective religious traditions. The fact is that the use of historical evidence is limited to the extent that it supports one’s own religious claim. The religious traditions of Ethiopia generally look with suspicion on any inquiry that questions the validity of the stories. In fact, part of the attraction of Salafi-related interpretations emanates from asserting religious traditions, as depicted in the Quran and the Hadith. Thus, any critical approach to these very sources will not win the heart of Ethiopian communities.

Part of the failure of Al-Ahbash also relates to this point. Al-Ahbash approaches some of the Quranic texts with rationalization, which is an unacceptable culture in Ethiopian religiosity. The acceptance of a theological tradition of Ethiopian Muslims and Christians hinges not on whether the claim passes tests of empirical validity or not but rather whether the religious texts say it or not. In the documentary, the contention was not only the origin of Christianity. There were also differences of opinion concerning the designation “a Christian nation” or “an island of Christianity.” Muslims generally suggest dropping the religious adjective or including Muslims in it, as in “an Island of Christians and Muslims.” To the Muslims, the term connotes the otherness of Islam from Ethiopian life.
For researchers, the issue is an empirical question, and thus from the demographic facts the designation is inappropriate. They also emphasize that the designation is dangerous since it does have an exclusionary orientation towards non-Christians. Deacons who have participated, however, have a different view on the designation. One of them said, “Now, the nation does not belong to one religion.” Their contention is that the designation is a historical fact that has changed. For EOTC adherents, the term signifies a source of national pride. Another deacon defended the designation that Ethiopia is a Christian island. He said:

*Does an island mean there is not any water in it? No. Island refers to an earth encircled with much water. It does not mean a land that does not have water. In Ethiopia besides Muslims, there are those who believe in traditional religions and atheists as well. Christianity, however, has remained encircled by Islam. The use of the designation is by foreign writers to depict this fact* (My own translation from the original Amharic).

The third contentious issue relates to the characterization of the imperial period as a period of marginalization based on the emperors’ religious convictions. The two Muslim interviewees emphasized the theme of marginalization as the proper designation of the imperial regimes. More specifically, the 1931 constitution and its revised version of 1955 were heavily criticized as exclusionary. There was also an emphasis that religious conversion was a pre-condition to assume state positions. The characterization of Ethiopian imperial kings as champions of religiously motivated oppression was hard to sell. The argument contended that Muslims subjects freely exercised their own religions without any pressure. The forced conversion of Wällo by Yohannes IV and Haile Selassie’s discriminatory policy for employment opportunities in the civil service were the main evidence advanced against the biased treatments of the kings. While criticizing the past as a homogenous policy that undermined the diversity of the nation, the present is extolled for its recognition of diversity.

EOTC interviewees, however, insisted that the motivation of the atrocities that were committed was not religiously but rather politically motivated incidents. Yohannes IV’s brutal measures against the Muslims of Wällo were more political than religious, since his conversion edict mainly targeted areas of political resistance. The evidence purported against the singling out of Muslims as the king’s enemy is that the Muslims attacked were those who opposed his kingship, not the ones who submitted. By implication, thus, the king did not force the conversion of Muslims within his area or the neighbors. The point the documentary attempted to make was to extol the Ethiopian citizens as people that refused to follow the edicts of conversion, be they of Christian kings or of Muslim sultanates, instead upholding the principle of peaceful coexistence.
There were, however, consensuses on four things. First, even if there were disagreements on the means used to achieve it, there was a fair consensus that the historically rooted religious tolerance could serve as a model. To this effect, the documentary included the voices of foreign journalists and tourists. Second, the “war of Ahmed Gragn,” which lasted for about 15 years (1529-1543), was a negative example of the intertwining of religion with politics. Quite interestingly, however, no Muslim interviewee commented on this remark. Thus, it is likely that the second consensus was made possible through the exclusion of other voices. From an Ethiopian Christian perspective, any attempt to defend the atrocities of the destruction of war will face resistance. Third, the anti-religious policy of the Derg state was another point of consensus. Fourth, there was also a consensus that some people abuse religious freedom.

The retelling of the EPRDF’s reign, unlike its predecessors, was full of praise. Much of the praise related to championing the codification of the religious tolerance culture into the constitution. The abuse of religious freedom discourse also carefully made conceptual distinctions. The abuse of religious freedom, however, was set apart from the formal structures of Islam and the EOTC. The conceptual distinction of formality from informality was mainly about fulfilling the legal requirements of the registration process. The conception of formality is a centralized system of accountability under the respective purview of the EOTC and the EIASC. Such conceptions of formality were mainly limited to interviewees presented as researchers. To the researchers, the formal religious institutions have a weak institutional capacity to discharge their role. Therefore, the overall suggestion was to strengthen the institutional capacity as a way forward in resolving religious conflicts.

The formal and informal distinction within religion has a profound implication. It indicates the intent of the state to subsume religion under centralized control and easily tame other voices. In a way, the suggestion frames the existing reform movements as disestablishing forces. What the suggestion ignores is that the popularity of the reform movements hinges on the fact that there is a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the central authorities. Besides weaker institutional capacities, however, no one spoke against the ills of the formal institutions within the EOTC and the EIASC. The intent of the depiction is to establish that anything that is outside the EOTC synod and the EIASC falls short of an authentic religious motive. Voices of dissent against these highest institutions are therefore either a sign of anarchism or guided by a pecuniary interest.

Underlying the issue of formality and informality within the EOTC and the EIASC lies the issue of religious authority. Informal authorities are thus the result of rebellious attitudes towards establishments or craftiness for amassing personal profit. The new role of informal authorities is disguised within altruism, as self-appointed guardians of religious truths. The religious representatives, however, have turned against various publications. They are of the opinion that the
varied expressions in print, electronic, and website outlets are the major outlets of radicalism ideology. What the religious leaders vehemently oppose is the attempt to discredit other religions. Despite this rejection of polemics, however, they also emphasize the right to defend one’s own religion in case of attacks.

Most of all, the discourse of radicalism provides interesting insights. First, the definitions forwarded made a distinction from *Atibakinet*. Thus, comments like, “radicalism is not strict adherence to religion,” “radicalism is not an increased attendance of mosques,” and “radicalism is not the building of mosques” were very frequent. Second, in almost all the cases, with the exception of one remark, the discourse of radicalism related to Islam. Third, in most of the cases the approach was at worst polemic and at best apologist. The point of departure was how others perceive them. Fourth, the main expression of radicalism was different among EOTC and Islamic adherents. For EOTC adherents, the overall issue related to failing to respect individual freedom and sacred spaces, while for Muslims it was the exclusion from national life.

Exclusion of Muslims from public spaces has various expressions, of which dominating public spaces with religious symbols and showing disrespect to other religions with annoying remarks are mentioned frequently. Radicalism, through examples, is defined as an exclusionary and disrespectful attitude. In this regard, Muslims have provided a number of insightful examples like, “Ethiopian citizenship is not through birth but rather with baptism and “Rather than washing five times, baptizing once and for all.” Fifth, the very source of radicalism is external; thus, it is foreign and imported to Ethiopia, having no social basis. In contrast to religious fundamentalism, religious radicalism signified the application of a political kind of competitive spirit in the realm of religion.

Researchers interviewed in the documentary presented two internal causes for Christians’ and Muslims’ extremism. They noted that among some Christians there is a perception that state measures to ensure the equality of all religions were at the expense of the EOTC. At times also, the allegation extended to accusing the state of disposing more favorably towards Muslims and systematically undermining the church.

Among Muslims also, there is a grudge, a mindset that predisposes itself to the historical marginalization narrative. There is also an attempt to correct what religious interference means. Many remarked that there are misunderstandings concerning the meaning of religious interference. Two points stand tall as corrective remarks. First, the prohibition of interference in religious affairs relates to spirituality. Thus, the state can neither add nor subtract from the spiritual teaching and activities of the religious. Related to enforcement of law and order, the state retains its mandate and that is not religious interference. Second, the cooperation of the religious leaders with the state is not religious interference. Thus, the cooperation of the state with the religious in matters of peace, democracy, and education does not at all signify religious interference.
The definition of radicalism among sheiks and EIASC members, however, is more of a matter of internal concern. Typical depictions of Wahhabism are interwoven in the narrative, such as the killing and disrespect of imams, the desecration of shrines and tombs, the rejection of the holiday for the birth of Muhammad, and the classification of prayers for dead saints as unacceptable Islamic practices. A negative external remark was only about the invading of public spaces with religious symbols. This small remark by itself is a contentious issue. Especially for those who are religiously oriented in the EOTC, the values of icons in expressing spirituality is very high. Icons are highly valued and are part of the expressions of being an Orthodox Christian, much as Muslims think of their *hijab*.

Another point of discussion was an attempt to define what religious tolerance is. As the answer implied, religious tolerance is a multifaceted phenomenon. First, it is about one’s attitude, a genuine respect for the right to choose a religion to adhere to, and tolerating some of the inconveniences that naturally might result as others practice their own religion. Public holidays and Friday prayers were examples forwarded to show how religious adherents should not complain about the inconveniences, even if the celebrations obviously cause traffic jams and movement becomes more difficult. The overall comment was that such incidents are signs of tolerance in relation to daily mundane activities. Some have also mentioned the fact that whenever religious shrines are built, both parties used to cooperate with each other. Another practical example relates to the building of worship centers, as churches were built through the mobilization of Muslims and Christians and charitable associations run through interfaith cooperation.

The overall assertion was that the constitution further strengthened the culture of coexisting without law through a stronger legal framework that recognizes all. Especially Muslims emphasized the importance of the constitution, including the provision of education through local language. They supported the ethno-linguistic-based federalism of the state on the ground that it creates equal opportunity.

In the narrative, there is an idealization of Ethiopian tolerance, and intolerance is woven into a foreign narrative, feeding Ethiopian’s general culture, which is suspicious of foreigners. The Islamic intolerance is depicted as an import from Arabs, which is inherently incongruent with the Islam of Ethiopia that has been reconciled to the culture. To the state, the whole effort by the protest leaders is to amass benefit to themselves led by a pecuniary agenda. In relation to describing the social cohesiveness, terms like the old and the previous had much prominence and respect. The overall discourse culminated by discrediting the protesters. The conclusion suggests practical measures in order to maintain the status quo through creating awareness about radicalism, categorizing radicals, building trust and partnership instead of nurturing suspicion, strengthening the capacity of religious
institutions, sustaining economic development, putting diversely enriched Ethiopianness at the center, and promoting consultation and dialogue in the constitutional way.

### 7.3.7 Jihadawi Harekat documentary: The conspiracy narrative

The *Jihadawi Harekat* documentary, Arabic for conquest by means of jihad, aired on February 5, 2013, using a prime time slot on Ethiopian Television (ETV). It was 61 minutes long (ETV, 2012a). Unlike other documentaries, heavy advertising preceded its transmission. The advertisement also caused additional controversy. The defendants appealed to the court to sanction the transmission of the documentary since it negatively affected their case, and the court granted the appeal. It was against the court injunction that ETV decided to air it. The popularity of the documentary increased due to another incident. For reasons still unknown to the public, many think mistakenly, on the very same evening ETV aired the unedited version. Whatever might be the actual reason, in the unedited version the chairperson of the Arbitration Committee of Muslim Protesters (ACMP), Abubakar Ahmed, is shown chained and being mocked and mistreated by interrogators.

A joint task force of two state organizations, the National Intelligence & Security Service (NISC) and the Ethiopian Federal Policy Commission (EFPC), produced the documentary. After the Muslim protest had begun, it was second in the series aired with the purpose of framing the protest within terror and religious extremism narratives. It was, however, the first after the ACMP case was brought to court. The self-designation, “An evidence-based documentary that shows a few individuals operating under the guise of Islam to accomplish the terror mission of Al-Shabaab,” at least indicates its ambition. What the documentary hoped was to unlock a grand conspiracy that endangered the secular state through an organized network with an intent to establish an Islamic state through means of force. The documentary clearly indicates the development in the narrative from one of religious tolerance to one that envisioned an Islamic state.

For analysis purposes, the documentary could be classified into three parts. The first part, which takes the first 7 minutes, presents various Islamic terror groups in Africa and the distraction caused through their radical operations. The next 2 minutes invoke history. It shows how Muslims were discriminated against in the previous states, the struggles they made to overthrow the state, and how their situation has radically improved with the new political administration. The remaining 51 minutes is allotted to providing evidence that there is a great conspiracy to install an Islamic state by force, which has been thwarted thus far only by the effort of Ethiopian security forces.

The broader scene of the conspiracy was within the grand narrative of the East African Al-Qaeda terror objective, which conceives terror as a means of creating instability and eventually installing an Islamic state. In the narration, there are two plots, which are somehow working independently but for one objective. The first plot relates to a military revolution, while the second is
ideological. In both cases, it is the accused in their own words who confess their crimes. In a way, the approach is one of confessional testimony. Comments are thus injections of various parties representing the EIASC (both current and previous), ordinary Muslims, and state officials. The role of EIASC members was mainly to provide clarification about the current protest movement with the purpose of discrediting it.

The ordinary Muslims’ role, in contrast, was to account for the reality that they are free and conducting their religious affairs without interference. The state officials’ role was to defend the law, the protection of constitutional rights, and the provision of law and order. Later social media campaigns have exposed that the majority of ordinary Muslims protesters are not ordinary people but are people who are working closely with the regime.

If not directly, then through negative association, the documentary negatively implicated some organizations and individuals. Islamic NGOs, more specifically IIRO and ALHF, were presented as organizations that finance extremist Islamic ideologies. Both NGOs were criticized as institutions controlled by radicals. The painting of AMMS in this light was possible through its curriculum and through a case in which one of its former teachers became part of the militant wing of the conspiracy. The Africa TV Islamic channel from Sudan was also associated with a prominent “jihadist preacher” among the Salafis of Ethiopia, Sheik Mohammed Hamidin Sirra. More interesting is that the two business centers where the radicalists purportedly met were named Salafia Juice house and Al-Sunnah Stationery; by coincidence or design, both are preferred self-designations of Salafis in Ethiopia.

Probably, more than its terror narrative, the documentary’s apologist agenda is hard not to notice. It attempts to defend four incidents. The first one explains the training that was conducted by the EIASC in the city of Harar, according to the protesters where the Al-Ahbash training campaign was officially launched. The counternarrative is by the former president of the EIASC, an eyewitness account. According to him, the plan for the training was conceived after extensive consultation with the Muslim communities. The consultations’ aim was finding out the contemporary challenges of the Muslim communities, the problems of the EIASC, and the wishes of the Muslim communities. One of the results of the consultation was a consensus that the Muslim communities’ foundation was upon shaky ground in relation to the basic teachings of Islam. One might notice that part of the controversy relates to the teaching of tawhid, the unity of God and the implication of that understanding in relation with the intercession of the saints who passed away.

The provision of the teaching also related to the identification of peaceful Muslims as opposed to radicals. According to him, the teachings made it easy to isolate the radical from the peaceful, which the radicals did not like. It is thus the fear of endangerment that created such havoc among the Muslim communities. The second defense came from the previous vice president of the EIASC.
the contested narrative space became AMMS. According to him, the school had become a breeding ground or center for radical Islamic ideology, producing radicals. He also pointed out that the school’s financing was from foreign sources, and since that stopped due to the new Charities and Societies Proclamation (also called CSO), the school did not have any legal base.

The result was to reinstate the school to its initial position, namely the status of a public school independently governed by board members. That arrangement also did not work, and a clash began among its leaders. Thus, MoE claimed ownership of the school. It is at this time that the EIASC interfered and started to negotiate with the MoE on the ground that the school also has a religious wing. The state responded positively and handed it over to the EIASC. The firing of its teachers, thus, was necessary given that they were radicals.

The third defense related to the state. Unlike the above two defenses, however, it was the accused themselves who were defending the state, and of course at the same time implicating themselves. It had been a nagging question as to why the police force raided what the protesters called the intended sadaqah (charity) program. Almost everyone sympathized with the event and the action of the state was unanimously condemned. In the social media, the depiction was as state terror against peaceful protesters. In the counternarrative, however, the state turned the event from a symbol of folly into wisdom. The accused themselves narrate that the intention was not really charity but rather to create a network where they would advance their nefarious agenda, a manipulative scheme that would bring the Muslim society under their subjugation.

The fourth defense related to the state’s actions. Unlike the previous case, the MoFA minister defended the action of the state. The most interesting part was his characterizations of Muslim sheiks. He said, “Our imams were beaten and their loudspeakers were taken over by force. Police were beaten.” One might curiously ask, “What does the adjective ‘our’ imply?” Some Islamic radio outlets saw it as a slip of a tongue that indicated the imams were agents of the state. The more likely interpretation, however, is state solidarity with religious leaders that were unable to defend themselves. As he speaks, the camera also zooms to injured police forces in uniform, a result of protesters throwing stones. The scarcity of such an event is evident in the fact that it is a few incidents repeatedly shown. Thus, in the counternarrative, the police forces turn from instigators into victims.

The evidence of an international connection hardly convinces a neutral observer. The documentary attempted to link the protest leaders with the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood through the quatrain Dr. Jasim Sultan. In a similar way, the connecting of the alleged militant wing with the protest leaders only because the militant wing members helped to organize opposition is very difficult to achieve. After all, people could have multiple memberships, and involvement in one does not necessarily implicate that the two overlap.
Following the documentary, many discussions were spurred. The discussions that followed raised important questions. When did the committee members turn into terrorists? This reasoning of the question is on the ground that state officials had sat in a roundtable discussion with the members. Thus, the committee classification is in contradiction with the previous actions of the state. One could provide a reasonable doubt and might ask another important question, “Would it be because new evidence that was not available has emerged?” According to the documentary, the answer is negative since it stated that security forces had been following the conspiracy all along. If that is the case, does it mean that the state negotiates with terrorists or turns any discussion into a terrorism discourse to legitimize its own position?

The doubts regarding the confession increased due to the fact that the accused members appealed quite a contrary case in their court proceedings to what they asserted in the documentary. In the court case the accused pleaded not guilty; therefore, many are of the opinion that there was coercion. Later statements made by the committee members and their testimonies at the court confirmed the suspicion. Further discrediting of the documentary came out of ETV itself. First, the unedited version of the documentary, which also includes the intimidation of the interrogator, added to the evidence that the activists were under duress. Second, Muslim activists successfully implicated two Muslims of participating in it as mere residents in Addis Ababa. Two of them were indeed residents. However, the women displayed as ordinary Muslims actually held positions. Both are members of the newly formed Addis Ababa’s Muslim Youth Association, serving in the capacity of president and vice president. The fact that official titles of each the other interviewees were properly given, with the exceptions of the two women, implied that it was not a mistake but an intentional cover-up. The implication derived from these two incidents is that the overall documentary is a drama or fiction having nothing to do with reality.

The Unity for Democracy and Justice Party, the only opposition party that had a seat in the Parliament, also made a statement that they were ashamed of the actions of the state and that it was a poorly written drama. There were also many discussions going on related to the event in the Diaspora communities. The case had extensive coverage by the Amharic Voice of America and the German Amharic Deutsche Welle. There was also extensive political analysis by Diaspora-run Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and Ethiopian-owned Diasporas Islamic radio stations. Awol K. Allo (2013), a Fellow in Human Rights at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences, commented on the film by saying, “The film seeks to transform the demands for freedom of religion into a joint criminal enterprise with terror groups.” As a sort of response and justification, there was another panel aired a month later, on March 4, 2013.

The overall objective of the documentary seems to frame the movement within Muslim communities within a long-term goal, believed to be the creation of an Islamic state. In the narration
what we see at present is thus a short-term goal that eventually leads to an Islamic state. To this end, the documentary positions two loosely connected wings working together, the militant and the ideological.

The documentary depicted the overall effort as part of a decentralized operation strategy followed in the region. It was thus not only compared with terrorist groups like Nigeria’s Boko Haram, Mali’s Ansar Din, and Somalia’s al-Shabaab, but also linked with them. The relationship with this terror organization is both structural and characterized by congruence of goals to pursue the establishment of an Islamic state. To realize this, an Islamic jihad conception was the only way forward. It is from this that the name of the documentary derives. Its realization was conspired through two interrelated but independent wings, one that works militarily and the other that furnishes the necessary intellectual background. It also takes into account the Kharijites, or locally called al-Takfir wa’l-Hijra, as its predecessor that has caused violence. The primary characteristics of these groups are excommunicating Muslims who are unwilling to submit under the constitution and prohibiting the payment of tax to non-Muslim authorities. It is good to note that it was the publication from within that effectively eroded the ideological ground of the group as un-Islamic.

In the discussion, the issue of the Awolia Mission Center is mainly described as a pretext for Islamic radicals. The former EIASC leaders report that multi-level meetings were conducted with the Muslim communities, in which they discovered that proper teaching of the religion did not disseminate well among its adherents. Accordingly, an action plan was set and effected. The overall objective of the training was to sift, through teaching, the radicals from the moderate Muslims. The implication is that it was the decision of the Muslim communities itself that met with opposition from radicals, who did not want to be exposed. The handing over of the mission school to the EIASC was also linked with two reasons.

First, it was linked with the issue of economic benefit that had caused quarrels in its leadership that led the school to be administered directly by an independent board for about a year. Second, the issue related to its legal status when the new law prohibited the involvement of international charities in religious affairs. Then the state stepped into the case and claimed ownership of the public school. The final resolution after much negotiation was to hand it over to the EIASC. The handing over of the school to the EIASC and the subsequent actions of the EIASC created a lot of noise. According to the EIASC leaders, the noise was because the center had been a strategic base from which the extremist ideology was disseminated. The administrative measures were thus essential in dismantling the prevailing terror network disguised as Islamic. The action the leaders took, however, made the EIASC a target institution to influence.

The EIASC looked reluctantly into the case and eventually decided to conduct a new election. In the narratives, it was clear that the questions of the Muslim communities were legitimate. The
difference is that the state and the EIASC are of the opinion that the requests were resolved, while the arbitration committee members are not. Knowing that their support did not have a wider base, they resorted to performing *sadaqah*, the sharing of food at the mosque level, which is strategically designed to create a network through which they could advocate their own people. Thus, the program became a means through which they could mobilize quite a lot of adherents. In any case, the state decided to proceed with the election. Many Muslims boycotted the election, but the state-controlled media reported it as a successful election in which 7.5 million Muslims turned out to choose freely their own representatives. In fact, the prime minister extended a congratulation message to the Muslim communities. As the case turned into violence where the Muslim communities divided and the long cherished tolerance towards Muslims was affected, the state interfered in the case to establish peace and security.

The documentary also links the group to the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt through a Qatari intellectual, Jassim Sultan, whose teachings two members of the protest leaders were said to have attended. Sultan is presented as the architect of the Arab Spring and the adviser of the Muslim Brotherhood and the movement in Egypt. There was also an attempt to establish a link between the local protest movement and the Eritrean state, the African television from Sudan, and other organizations that are classified as terrorist by the Ethiopian Parliament. In fact, the suspicion of some towards the others was confirmed among some circles, yet not because the evidence was strong, but rather because of prior convictions. Those who thought through the documentaries, however, generally took it as further evidence to discredit the media as a propaganda missionary of the EPRDF.

### 7.3.8 Why was Sheik Nuru assassinated? documentary: Radicalism turning into terror

The third documentary asks, “Why was Sheik Nuru assassinated?” Here the producer is a joint task force of two state organizations, the National Intelligence & Security Service (NISC) and the Federal Policy Commission (FPC). It was the shortest of all and aired on August 15, 2013, lasting 22 minutes (ETV, 2013). Sheik Nuru is from Dessie, a historic town known for its religious tolerance and its reputation for training Islamic scholars. In the recent religious interference and the radicalism discourse of the media, he had a prominent position. Thus, the public knew him well beyond the surrounding area and also in various discourses related to religious tolerance. He was one of those Muslim leaders who fiercely criticized Wahhabism as radicals and ignorant in the *One nation, many religions* documentary. Thus, for the protesters, he was a voice that created a gap between the Muslim communities by siding with the state.

His assassination occurred on July 7, 2013, around 8:30 at night. He was age 72 and was killed while returning to his home from a nearby mosque where he served as imam. In the area, he was also
a member of the newly elected EIASC of the region. His death spurred a lot of reaction. Probably no other death besides that of the prime minister had such extensive media coverage and the various demonstrations that followed. In the documentary, the whole event is depicted as the orchestration of a terrorist network. Thus, his death was not an isolated incident but rather part of a conspiracy. In the narratives, his representation was as an eminent danger. The police investigation uncovered that he was part of a wider plot, the killing of four elders, all of whom were serving as EIASC leaders at the zonal level. In the documentary, EIASC members reported that radicals had extended similar kinds of death threats to respected Muslim leaders. According to the threatened EIASC leaders, the very source of such atrocity is the teachings of Wahhabism. The depiction of Wahhabism was as a heretic doctrine, advanced for pecuniary gain and with a goal devoid of a religious agenda and politically motivated.

More than anything, the gist of the documentary was to implicate the protest movement as foreign in origin. The foreign evidence provided was the Dimitsachin Yisema’s second anniversary commemoration in Washington, D.C. The Egyptian Sheik Shaker Elsayed was one of the guests invited as a speaker. He is a controversial imam of the Dar Al-Hijra mosque in the US. From his speech the documentary quoted him saying “…they [referring to Muslims] are last if anything is being distributed except if it is arms for jihad.” The documentary also implicated Berekah Broadcasting Network (BBN), a Diaspora Ethiopian Muslim association, through the provision of moral and financial support to the protesters in Ethiopia. The framing of the support was also as political. Ginbot Sebat, a newly formed opposition group working closely with the Eritrean state through an armed struggle, served as a link with the protest movement. The overall implication is that the movement is a conspiracy that came from outside Ethiopia; it has both ideological and financial support from foreigners, terror is its approach, and its cause is mainly politically motivated. The documentary’s aim seems to have been to vindicate state actions against the leaders of the dissidents.

The documentary spurred many discussions. Some people are of the opinion that the whole event was “drama,” an orchestration poorly performed by the state that sadly cost the shedding of an elderly man’s blood. Following that, various demonstrations supported by the state took place. The failure of the narrative to convince many, however, emanates from the fact that the nature of the protest movement proved itself peaceful. Thus, linking the protest movement with the terror narrative was not that easy for the public. The remark of the Egyptian Sheik, however, spurred a lot of discussion among the Christian communities. Many cannot comprehend the invitation of an imam, more so an Egyptian in origin, in the peaceful struggle movement of Muslims. Some even took the presentation of an Egyptian imam with a provocative statement as evidence that reinforces the
previous presumption that there is clearly a disguised agenda of establishing political Islam in Ethiopia.

7.3.9 Non-state media: Religious interference

The recent protest movement’s demonstration of Ethiopian Muslims traces its origin to the Awolia Muslim Mission School (AMMS). The public protest began following the issuance of a letter from the leadership of the EIASC dated December 31, 2011. The letter unconditionally fired the school’s Arabic teachers, some administrative personnel, the main imam of the school’s mosque, and his assistant. The decision also brought an abrupt end to the education of the Arabic students. In response to the letter on January 3, 2012, the Arabic department with its secondary school students showed dissent against the decision of the EIASC. At the outset, the requests of the students were administrative. They demanded the return of the imam, the reinstatement of the teachers, and the opening of the college.

The EIASC leadership, however, did not respond immediately and positively to the questions. On January 10, 2012, the students refused to leave the compound of the school, and the protest became a 24-hour protest, with them changing their request to bringing down the leadership. This moment was an important juncture for the protesters. To them, it signified that the focus of the issue changed from the problem to the source of the problem. The new slogan became, “ash-sha'b yourid isqt al-mejlis” (the people demand the removal of the mejlis) a chant of the Arabic Spring with modification only to the object of opposition, which has become a nationally representing Islamic institution.

The refusal of the students to leave the compound and the change in the requests’ content increased the attention of the Muslim communities. The students also called on the Muslim communities to perform their Friday communal prayer and show solidarity with the requests of the students. On January 13, an unprecedented number of Muslims joined the Friday communal prayer at AMMS mosque. On January 20, the gathering elected 20 representatives and the requests officially become the requests of Muslims. All 20 were popular preachers and youths. A consultation among the committee members decided to reduce the committee members from 20 to 17 and improved representation. A January 27 meeting approved the new list, and the composition included scholars and elderly of the Muslim communities besides preachers and youths. It is good to note that out of the previous 20 only seven remained in the newly reformed composition.

The main imam fired by the EIASC was Sheikh Umer Wele. He studied Islamic education for 25 years in the Jamia Islamia Medina of Saudi Arabia. Upon his return in 1988, he served for an uninterrupted 24 years as both imam of the AMMS mosque and a teacher, until the EIASC’s decision to fire him. Part of the controversy between the EIASC and the imam derived from the June
2011 incident of Harar town, where the EIASC provided religious training coupled with constitutional clauses to various imams about religious radicalism and extremism.

The trainers were from Lebanon and espoused Al-Ahbash interpretations of Islam, which staunchly condemn Wahhabism as a radical and extremist ideology and are sympathetic to Sufi interpretations of Islam. Sheik Umer refused to stay in the meeting. His firing thus framed him as “a father of Wahhabism” and led to the dismantling of the Arabic department where he served as a teacher. In fact, the meeting branded AMMS as an institution that incubates religious extremists. Later, however, the EIASC granted him his position as imam, but he was not allowed to teach at the school. The decision was very late and did not abate the protest movement since the new objective had already become to topple the leaders of the EIASC rather than to find an immediate solution for the administrative requests of the students.

As the then-president of the EIASC and the Ministry of Federal Affairs indicated repeatedly, there was a perception that the school had become a breeding ground for radical Islamic ideology. Consequently, the leadership of the school was handed over to the EIASC. The EIASC lost its legitimacy among Ethiopian Muslims, and came to be perceived mainly as the state’s machinery. In a few months’ time, in December 2011, the EIASC removed its imam, who had served over 20 years, and dismissed its 50 teachers as well as various administrators. The effort was interpreted as the final cleansing for the promotion of “Ahbash.” The measure, however, resulted in unexpected protest from the Muslim communities. The protest of the Muslim communities in Addis Ababa became public at the Awulia Mission School, which provides secular and religious education from primary school to the college level. At the initial stage, the protest organization was that of a handful of students in the school, and their requests were mainly administrative. The requests were for the reopening of the department and the reappointment of the imams, the teachers, and administrators. The way the requests were ridiculed by the EIASC leaders fueled the protests and redirected them against their own leaders, the EIASC. The case, however, turned public favor against the EIASC and attracted the Muslim communities in Addis Ababa, and the leadership transferred formally to the committee that the dissidents selected. Despite the efforts of both the state and the EIASC, the protest failed to be contained in the capital city. Instead, it immediately spread all over the Muslim communities throughout the country. The immediate target of the protest became the EIASC, and the ground was that 12 years had passed since the previously contested election. Many felt that this was the right moment where they could get rid of the illegitimate leaders.

The illegitimacy of the EIASC leaders was reasoned on the ground of corruption, incompetency, heresies, and an overdue election. In fact, elections were supposed to be done every 5 years according to the bylaws, but already 12 years had passed. There was widespread conviction that the root cause of the problem was the EIASC. Among others, some of the prominent banners and t-shirts
that were seen include, “Unelected EIASC leaders do not represent me!” and “Choosing our leaders is our constitutional right!” The whole endeavor was construed in terms of human rights language and constitutional rights.

The state denies that it is urging the acceptance of Al-Ahbashism, but many Muslims do not accept the denial. Based on the anti-terror law enacted in 2009, which gave a broad definition of terrorism and provided the regime with extensive power to counteract any terror movements at its own discretion, the activists are being charged as terrorists and imprisoned. The state has also not only produced videos linking the activists with terrorism but also broadcast documentaries with its own media.

The 17-member committee submitted three requests, all of which in one way or another connected with the EIASC’s leadership. The first question related to the dismissal of EIASC leaders and a call for a democratic election of new leadership under the purview of an independently elected electorate. The second one was a request to the state that it stop meddling in religious affairs through forced imposition of Al-Ahbash training in cooperation with the EIASC. The third one was a request that the Awolia Islamic Center be administered not by the EIASC but by a board drawn from the Muslim communities.

At the beginning, MoFA participated in a roundtable discussion with the committee members, which the committee interpreted as bestowing legitimacy. The opinion of the office concerning this meeting, however, was that it was part of the usual procedure. The office looks into any religious appeal; thus, the meeting is merely a usual procedure of listening to an appeal. To the protest movement leaders, however, the initial meeting was interpreted as an endorsement of the committee. The committee, however, rejected the proposed solutions as unsatisfactory.

The opposition afterward was thus considered by the state as illegitimate, with the hidden agenda of establishing an Islamic state. As the dissent continued, the state charged and imprisoned the movement’s leaders under the anti-terrorism law, inciting people to chaos. The detention and the subsequent prosecution of the detained arbitration committee members became the fourth question. The committee members, however, successfully continued to mobilize the Muslim communities. The active participation of Diaspora Muslims also provided an impetus and wider visibility in the international arena. The main theme of the protests was captured in its motto, “Dimitsachin Yisema,” which means, “Let our voice be heard.”

The state hoped that the protest would abate following the various measures it undertook. Contrary to the state’s perception, however, the momentum has persisted over 3 years. The opposition persisted despite a massive state-controlled media propaganda campaign that implicated the leaders and the movement as radicals and extremists who would erode the culturally embodied religious toleration and subvert the constitutional provisions. More specifically, the media framed the
movement leaders in light of political ambitions and the institution of an Islamic state. The accused framed their questions in light of freedom of religion and such charges as a mere allegation. The effect of the media was also tremendous. It succeeded in instilling fear and suspicion among the general community towards the movement, especially among Christians.

In some corners, the accusations somehow confirmed the earlier fears, since there were already many popular and polemic writings that framed the current Islamic consciousness as anti-Christian, anti-Ethiopian, and radical in its nature. The recent violent incidents that targeted Christians and their worship centers also fed the suspicion positively. There is also a tendency to lump the current movement with Islamic radicalism like the global media do. The propaganda, however, did not seem to win much support from the Muslim and Christian communities. Part of the failure was due to the credibility loss by the state in the information they provide. Over time, the state earned the infamous reputation of depicting any kind of opposition as an assault against the constitutional ethos, including the expressions of journalists.

The overall context of the protest is the state’s pervasive intolerance of dissent of any sort. Many have noted that the EPRDF’s view of democracy is based on the ideas of a vanguard party that conceives its political survival upon its hegemony (Asnake, 2013, p. 153; Leenco, 1998, pp. 67-68; Praeg, 2006, p. 100). Thus, it can only incorporate organizations of its own manufacture and rejects any independent institution. In line with such a perception of the EPRDF, the public distrusts state information unless it conforms to one’s own earlier hypothesis. Ironically, the effort of discrediting the committee imposed by the state became, on the contrary, a source of legitimacy in the Muslim communities, as a true guardian of the interests of the Muslim communities. Some of the opposition leaders have also earned a reputation for airing the concerns of the Muslims, even though they did not succeed much in gaining the affiliation of the Muslim communities.

The role of information technology was also profound, since it has become a source of counternarratives available at people’s fingertips. There are also established alternate media that offered an outlet for wider audiences. These media outlets presented the movement in a much more positive light through the provision of counternarratives to the Muslim communities. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Voice of America (VOA), Germany’s Deutsche Welle (DW), Cable News Network (CNN), and Qatar’s Al-Jazeera are some of the international media with which the Muslim community interacts. The interest of these media, however, is sporadic and mainly related to major incidents, and in no way could they replace the Internet.

From an organized protest perspective, the Dimitsachin Yisema movement is unprecedented in the history of Ethiopian Muslims. No one would have ever imagined that the predominantly young committee members would have the required resources of knowledge, skill, and finance, since the public demonstration began as the administrative dissent of a handful of youths. The public
demonstrations are historically unmatched on various grounds. The movement managed to marshal a large number of public demonstration participants despite the coercions of the state. The fact that the movement leaders succeeded in directing and controlling the anger of the youth towards clearly articulated goals has proved advantageous since it gave the dissidents an objectively measurable sense of direction. They have also maintained regularity of the protest despite internationally and locally documented human right violations including the loss of many lives. The leaders also managed to inspire the creation of a web of networks that connect the Islamic communities and undermine all the efforts to contain them. It has thus united many Muslims both at home and abroad. The movement also successfully designed and implemented peaceful struggle strategies.

Part of the strategy was to create a memorable symbolic action that shows bravery to achieve one’s goal; a very good example is the Salat man. This is a memorable symbolic icon of peaceful resistance. In some media, the image has been compared to the famous Tiananmen Square demonstration in 1989 when a single individual stopped military tanks from interrupting a public protest (Thomas, 2013). There are many slogans that emphasize martyrdom and sacrifices. The protesters have been convinced that what they are doing has an eternal reward. Thus, participation in the movement somehow elevates a sense of personal significance. Many youngsters do think that it is a privilege to be part of this historic moment. In terms of creating a heightened Islamic identity consciousness, the movement has probably succeeded more than the cumulative results of all the past diverse reform efforts combined. The stance of the state towards the movement, however, has not bent even an inch but rather continues to be much more intense and still in a defensive posture. There are various speculations as to where the movement could head.

The activists claimed repeatedly that the public demonstrations in Addis Ababa ranged between a hundred thousand to half a million; the upper margin is more than the reported Islamic population of the capital city. In fact, a mere observation would indicate that not all of the protesters in Addis Ababa were from the city. Many Muslims traveled both from nearby villages and remote areas to show solidarity with the movement. Knowing such physical movement of people towards the capital city, there were even attempts to curb the movements of Muslims by the state forces through tighter control.

There were incidents in which, whenever there were mass protests in the capital city, the free movement of Muslims to the capital city was restricted. These and similar actions, however, proved to be fruitless, and the momentum of the opposition has been continually on the rise. Despite the imprisonment of the leaders with a criminal charge of terrorism, the opposition persisted over a period of three years. The persistence indicates that the movement is not a single, vintage event, unlike other historic public demonstrations of the Muslim communities. It seems that the participants are determined to press forward until they get a satisfactory answer. In almost all of the cases, the
opposition movement’s public boundaries are mosques. In fact, in many cases, the crowd overflows as they exceed the geographical space. Protesters are discouraged from conducting their dissent outside the fences of the mosques due to fear and strategic considerations. The fear is that the state might attack.

The Ethiopian policy has a reputation of using brutality to curb any opposition that might have a political implication. The state actually took a brutal measure at the 2013 Id al-fitr celebration in response to public protests around the stadium. The second reason is strategic. The organizers are convinced that conducting an opposition campaign outside the mosque would increase the possibility of a crackdown and fail to maintain the cohesive unity. Mosques are also the spaces that the movement is trying to occupy to disseminate “true Islamic ideals” upon which the Ummah could be built. The dissidents frequently speak of their consensus, which is usually expressed with applause after the statements are read, as the *Ummah decision*. In most of their discussions and radio broadcasts, it is no wonder that mosques are usually referred to as “spaces that we have secured with many sacrifices.”

Conducting the protest from the mosque also provides the leaders of the movement a sense of spiritual authority over the participants and imparts strength to persist against all the odds. Until now, therefore, mosques seem to be the only tolerated and legitimate public spaces for dissent. The appointed imams of the mosques, which are under the authority of the EIASC, cannot control the opposition. Besides a few exceptions, the state is not taking measures against the activities conducted within the mosque other than observing it with military forces. Outside the mosques, the protests are in stealth and difficult to spot. A later call for demonstrations, however, makes evident that it has only subsided to return later with more vigor.

The movement has also spread throughout the country and has a clearly discernible pattern, which is mainly limited to cities and features actors who are not only young, but most of them are very young. In most of the cases the oldest are in their early thirties and the majority are in their twenties and below. Most of the opposition cities are located within the regional state of Oromia, home of the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia and known for its secessionist tendencies. As a result, Oromia ethnic-based opposition political entrepreneurs in the Diaspora are attempting to use the opportunities for advancing ethnic questions by intertwining them with religion.

The nationalist-bent Diaspora political activists are likewise attempting to construe the opposition in terms of their own agenda. The movement has become an attractive dissenting force that has mobilized many, so that every political entrepreneur envisions to manipulate it for their own cause. The local leaders of the movement, however, deny any association with political parties. In fact, they repeatedly indicate that their requests are not at all political but rather are the legitimate exercise of constitutionally endowed rights. The framing of the requests is within the framework of
human rights language. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church’s (EOTC) exiled synod in the Diaspora has also shown solidarity with the movement. At home, however, many Christians are quietly observing the development.

The dominance of the young in the movement is evident even in the leadership, as the majority of the leaders are in their thirties and below, with the exception of a few. This does not imply, however, that the youth do not have the support of the elderly. The movement is indeed a city phenomenon. Even in areas where Muslims are the majority, such as the Afar and Somali regions, the movement has not attracted many followers, as these areas have only a few well-developed cities. It is not only the absence of major cities that explains the low profile of these regions in the opposition but also the fact that in these areas traditional authorities hold the power of governing their respective clans. The elderly are the leaders, and the youths are still under their influence. Such authorities, however, have been dismantled in the cities, and therefore the movement has a stronghold there. Thus, the opposition demonstrations are a city phenomenon of the youth.

Economically speaking, the majority of the demonstrators are mainly from the lower classes. The well-to-do, who ambitiously joined and supported the movement, backed off, partly because the state tightened the financial control and threatened their very survival. They did not, however, abandon the movement but rather have resorted to a different mechanism, channeling their Zakāt contribution towards helping individuals under the movement. The historical and current marginalization themes espoused by the activists appeal to the general Muslim population.

The tension between the state and the Muslim community has been growing slowly over two decades. What makes the last few years unique is the pace of change. The momentum has been mounting at a galloping rate since July 2011, when the EIASC started to provide training for Muslim leaders throughout the country. The activists accused the EIASC training of being heretic, and social media became the main source of information. To them, the training signifies efforts to indoctrinate the ideology of a new faction called “Ahbash,” which is perceived to have a moderate position towards other religions but a critical stance towards Wahhabism, which many feel has a strong footing in Ethiopia. The Al-Ahbash founder is one of the few Islamic scholars who issued a fatwa against Wahhabism (Bar, 2008, pp. 9-10; Kabha & Erlich, 2006, p. 524).

The activists generally avoid discussing Wahhabism among themselves and when they encounter others. In cases where they discuss it, they indicate their positive evaluation of it, emphasizing that their interpretation of Islam is in line with the scripture and prophetic tradition. The movement construes itself as a commitment to save the “true Islam.” The youth seem to believe that there is a monolithic Islam, which follows the scripture and the prophetic traditions. “Ahbash” is thus a Sufi-bent innovation. Behind the struggle, there is a widely held narrative that Islam is endangered and the EIASC is the main apparatus. The presence of state officials, in the name of providing
training about the constitution, and various public announcements have also created the impression that the state is at the center of the conflict. Thus, the demonstrators accuse the state of violating constitutionally enshrined rights of freedom of worship using the EIASC.

Besides the narrative that circulates among informal networks, the role of information communication technology and the Diaspora communities cannot be underestimated. Some websites and radio stations have earned trust among the Muslim population. These websites, social media, and online radio stations disseminate decisive messages that mobilize the communities. Whatever arises in the online context is soon distributed in hard copies, CDs, and mobile messages since many do not have access to the Internet. Knowing this, the state continually monitors the Internet and at times blocks things. Due to technological innovations, however, people always have a way of circumventing the restrictions imposed. From my discussions with activists, it is evident that the distrust towards the EIASC is redirected to trusting the websites and radio stations that air the “true concerns” of the Muslim communities.

The unwritten rule has become, “Whoever is approved and endorsed by the online communities is right, and the others when found different are considered guilty.” Both the Islamic radio stations and the websites are from either Europe or the United States, indicating the role of the Diaspora. Besides an online presence, the Diaspora communities have sent delegates that both visit the prisoners and try to negotiate deals with the state. The role of social media in the overall protest process is profound. It is through social media, especially Facebook, that provision of information and direction to the movement was made possible.

Besides the various training sessions provided to Islamic religious leaders by the EIASC, however, the state action towards Islamic NGOs also served as a catalyst. In September of 2011, the state revoked the license of the International Islamic Relief Organization, a Saudi NGO funding the religious school at the Awolia Mission School in Addis Ababa. The revocation was on the ground that humanitarian organizations could not run religious institutions, as the recently approved NGO law prescribes. EPRDF’s policy actions are consistent with the attitude of other states in the Horn of Africa.

As Bellucci and Zaccaria (2009, p. 103) argue, the attitude of states in the Horn of Africa towards political Islam has been ruthless. The result of such policies is that political Islam has found other legitimate ways to manifest politically. One of these ways is its transformation into movements and its penetration of society throughout organizations providing services and support. In a similar line, others also argue that some of the Islamic NGOs have been used as a vehicle for spreading political Islam at an accelerated rate by combining faith and material rewards among the disenfranchised Muslim poor (Salih, 2002, p. 1).
Ahmed (2009, p. 1) also maintains that most of the modern Islamic NGOs pursue two aims: While giving support to those in need, they simultaneously try to spread their particular version of Islam. In this regard, although the majority of Muslims in the Horn of Africa are adherents of traditional or Sufi Islam, the version of the religion emphasized by transnational Islamic NGOs is the Salafi or Wahhabi version propagated in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States. Its adherents seek to purify, as they see it, the practice of Islam by eradicating the veneration of holy persons typical of Sufi Islam and by imposing the wearing of the Arab-style female headscarf. They attempt to transform society through education, radio and television shows, summer camps and programs, and publications (Rabasa, 2009, p. 42).

### 7.3.10 Conclusion

The year 2009 marked a transition to a pre-emptive policy towards religious radicalism. To this end, MoFA started pre-emptive awareness campaigns. In line with the newly assigned roles, MoFA started to provide various types of training to the political administration, the civil servants, and religious institution leaders with the intent of building a national consensus on the issue. The training sessions were about religious conflicts and resolving sectarian conflicts within them. The training conceived interreligious and intra-religious conflicts in light of security. In relation to MoFA training and the EIASC, the end of 2011 marked the height of the growing dissent among Ethiopian Muslims. The administrative dissent that began as an Arabic department students’ demonstration at Awolia Muslim Mission School (AMMS) ended in framing the secular state as a major architect of a nefarious scheme plotted against Islam and the EIASC as the main apparatus. In the discourse of the state, interference became the central theme. The protest movement’s three requests revolved around the independence of the EIASC. The unconditional support of the state towards the leadership of the EIASC and an extolling of the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam has translated into a narrative that the state is promoting its version of Islam.

Based on the anti-terror law enacted in 2009, the state sentenced its leaders from 7 to 22 years on attempted terrorism, conspiracy, and incitement. The effective use of online media about the protest movement brought to the public arena the discourse of religious radicalism and state interference. In the documentaries and various public announcements, the Ethiopian state continued to label the requests as extremism, with a disguised political agenda. The state media framed the protest in light with religious extremism that intends to subvert the constitution and erode the culturally embedded religious tolerance. The committee members, however, successfully continued to mobilize the Muslim communities. The active participation of Diaspora Muslims also provided an impetus and wider visibility in the international arena. The main theme of the protests was captured in its motto, “Dimitsachin Yisema,” which means “Let our voice be heard.” The state hoped that the
protests would abate following the various measures it has undertaken. Contrary to the state’s perception, the momentum persisted for more than 3 years.
Chapter Eight: A Rhetoric of Sensibility

8.1 Background

At the core of the recent controversy between the contemporary Ethiopian state and the dissenting Muslims lies the discourse of state interference in the interreligious affairs of the Muslim communities and an increasing radicalization among Ethiopian Muslims. Islamic radicalization is the narrative of the state and the EIASC. In the counternarrative, the dissidents accuse the state of circumventing the constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom, the requirement that the state should not interfere in religious matters. The state views its stance as a commitment to defending the constitution in order to maintain the secular state principles it espouses.

The two competing narratives not only are diametrically opposite but also subtly promote and discourage competing interpretations of Islam, the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam favored by the state and the EIASC and the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation favored by the dissidents. The difference in opinion between the state and the dissidents indicates their respective assessment of the present and the past religious conflicts. For the state and most Christians, Islamic radicalism is a clear and present danger. The debate about the extent to which the perceived Islamic radicalism has pervaded the Muslim communities.

On the contrary, for dissidents, the Islamic radicalism discourse of the state is a fabrication, a pretext for pursuing anti-Islamic policies. In the midst of the controversy also lies the EIASC. Why did the EIASC become the center of the contest? How did the dissidents transform an administrative question into a national-level protest movement against a state reputed for intolerance of any signs of dissent? What were the mobilization mechanisms of the protesters? In providing answers to these questions, the intent is to show that the memory entrepreneurs, the dissidents, and the state, constructed boundaries that set criteria for exclusion and othering, shaping the collective memory and consciousness while discrediting competing narratives.

8.2 Repertories of Collective Actions: Constitutional Provisions

Perhaps for the first time in history, religious-related provisions of the Ethiopian constitution have taken a central role among the Muslim communities. In the following paragraphs, I explain how the dissidents use constitutional language and clauses to promote their cause. I also note that the nature of the audience, the background of the speakers, and the perception of the dissidents with regard to the peacefulness of the state as it deals with dissent determine the use of constitutional clauses.

16 For a detailed examination of how the two interpretations differ in their conceptual, political, and theological aspects, see Kabha and Erlich (2006, pp. 519-538).
The requests of the dissidents and the framing of the protest were set in line with constitutional clauses. This does not mean that religious arguments did not have prominence among the dissident Muslims. Whenever the activism is among the Ummah (the gathering of the faithful Muslims) the rationalization of the cause primarily relies upon the Quran and the Hadith. The dissidents’ representatives also supplemented their argument with the fatwa (religious edict) of prominent personalities in the Sunni world. The uses of fatwa in the discourse are, however, minimal. The minimal use of fatwa, among others, is consistent with the Salafi-Wahhabi approach to religious texts. The overall stance is that one has to make one’s own theological case of the Quran and the Hadith, rather than simply relying upon the opinion of others. The use of external authority is not discarded altogether but rather served a different function, to show that the Sunni world has a consensus on the matter.

The approach of the appeals made to the Muslim communities also varies with the nature of the communication. If the activism is other than face-to-face communication, such as a video or an audio recording, the overall emphasis changes from religious texts to constitutional provisions. This does not mean constitution-related discussions are irrelevant in face-to-face communication, but rather that the constitution plays a secondary role. In face-to-face communication, thus, the constitutional clauses are discussed primarily as pragmatic constraints for Muslims who are living in a secular state. The role of the constitutional clauses, thus, is not an instrument that forms their opinion. The perception of the dissident Muslims is that Islam covers all areas of life, and their primary allegiance is to the teaching of Islam. The conviction is that the authority of religious texts, rightly interpreted, should guide religious life. The constitution also serves another important function, a means of safeguarding the dissidents from the brutal action of the state. The dissidents frequently emphasize the need to follow orderliness and to obey the nation’s legal frameworks so as not to give any legitimate reason for the state to use lethal force against them.

The emphasis on the constitution also derives from the educational background of one of the dissident committee members. Kamil Shemsu is a lawyer by profession and expounds the legal provisions to both the committee members and the dissidents. One could also note that the use of the constitution hinges on the extent that members of the leadership are well versed in the constitutional provisions and legal frameworks. One could clearly notice that the prominence of constitution and related human rights language dominates among leaders who are well acquainted with secular education. The elderly with no secular educational background, but who openly support the movement, mainly employ religious texts to convince their audience. Of course, there are exceptions to this predominant pattern.

In terms of constitutional provisions, the dissidents’ request from the state is for justice. For example, the dissenting protesters at the Anwar Mosque on July 4, 2014 were chanting ሁትህ ዞፈቀኝ! (I
thirst for justice!.asking for our rights is not terror!). The argument was that neither the state nor the EIASC has the right to endorse certain interpretations of Islam and outlaw the other. The dissidents set their request as an inclusive claim rather than an exclusivist one. The implication is that Al-Ahbash should not dominate the EIASC as a nationwide official representative of the state. The favorable disposition towards the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam is thus unjust. More so is the stance of the state, since supporting Al-Ahbash implies the subversion of the constitutional mandate that prohibits the state from interfering in religious affairs. Behind the claim, however, there is a subtle exclusivist stance. The dissidents reject the Al-Ahbash interpreters’ assumption of the role of imam in the existing mosques unless they establish their own new mosque. The stance of exclusion is evident is the process of “othering” the Al-Ahbash interpretation as a foreign sect that is un-Islamic.

In the public appearances of the dissidents, the dissidents commonly reject the proposition that the antagonism is between the Sufi and the Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters of Islam. Some even deny that there is a thing called Wahhabism in Islam reasoning and assert that there are only the four major schools of Fiqh or religious law within Sunni Islam.\(^{17}\) The rejection of Wahhabism is a strategic technique to avoid the label and the negative connotation that it invokes in order to frame the discussion or the debate in their favor. The overall approach of the debates clearly exhibits the influence of prominent global personalities like Zakir Naik. Samson (2015, p. 281) remarked about the digital landscape, “…VCD/DVDs have managed to generate a hyper-reality where the actual conflict is generated a priori to any actual or real conflict.” When pressed, however, the dissidents acknowledge that there was a person named Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) in the 18\(^{th}\) century. They also add that his teachings were primarily focused on the principle of \textit{tawhid} and are not as such new to Islam, and his methods were peaceful, contrary to the widely held perception of the movement named after him. No further comments are provided besides positively painting the movement’s origin and its intent. In their approaches to the religious texts and prophetic traditions of Islam, however, it is evident that the puritanical and literalist understanding of Islam was retained from him and his \textit{kitab} (books) like \textit{al-Tawhid} are popular among them.

To the dissidents, what Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab did was to remind his fellow people not to go astray from the true way, but strictly follow the ways of the Salafs. With such remarks, they also point out that the term Wahhabi is an imposition by adherents and supporters of Al-Ahbash or enemies of Islam to discredit the true practice of Islam in the way of Salafs, the first three generations of the early Muslim communities as recorded in the Quran and Hadith literature. In an interview with Voice of America Amharic, Ahmed Kemal, one of the dissidents’ representing committee members, responded to the question of whether Ethiopian Muslims are Wahhabi or not by

\(^{17}\)Shia Muslims are not considered part of the normative Islam.
saying, “They (Ethiopian `ulama) are not Wahhabi. In Ethiopia, rural Muslim `ulama …are Salafs. Even if we say that they are Sufi, what they followed was the ways of Salafs…If they say whoever follows Quran and Hadith then let them name it whatever they wish” (VOA, 2012).¹⁸

In examining the centrality of the constitution in the protest movement, I noted that the Ethiopian constitution has taken a central role unprecedented in the history of the religious communities in Ethiopia. The use of it, among the dissidents, is not as the main text that determines their message but as a constraint imposed on them that they should submit. Those leaders of the dissidents with a secular background tend to feel more at home with the constitutional clauses, while those with a lesser educational background tend to emphasize the religious texts in presenting their cases. The submission to the constitution is also a counternarrative to the state that depicts their effort as unconstitutional and a means of earning sympathy from the larger community. The other role the constitutional clauses play is a means of protecting the protesters against brutal action via the pretext of subverting the constitution. The espousing of constitutional means and peaceful ways to resolve matters also serves as an apologist tool that tends to depict Islamic-related dissent with violence.

8.3 What is at Stake?

The contemporary hostility between the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretations of Islam and the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam is inextricably linked to the EIASC. In order to situate it historically, it is proper to begin with the background of the EIASC. Following the fall of the Haile Selassie state, its de facto establishment dates back to March 13, 1976. Its operation during the socialist régime (1974-1991) was not that significant since all religious institutions were under the state’s stringent control. In substance, the main activity of the EIASC during the period was facilitating Hajj to Mecca (Desplat & Østebø, 2013, p. 7; Østebø, 2012, p. 174). The freedom of religion since 1991 presented new opportunities to the EIASC. Following the new opportunities, it structured itself, and its role in the Muslim community increased.

In the new era of religious freedom, however, there were also other independent Islamic institutions established to cater for the ever-increasing religiosity among the Muslim communities. Indeed, in terms of national religious representation the EIASC remained the only one. In terms of activities, however, the new Islamic institutions also shared the religious space among the Muslim communities that were traditionally under the jurisdictions of the EIASC. The leadership of the EIASC voted against those Islamic institutions that it felt were redundant and passed a resolution for their closure. The EIASC’s attempt to monopolize the religious landscape of the Muslim community increased.

¹⁸ His reference to rural indicates that Islamic education is mainly provided in the rural part of Ethiopia where its scholars reside.
communities, however, caused strife and conflict. The 1995 intra-religious conflict to control and tame the EIASC’s leadership monopoly caused the destruction of property and loss of lives. The result of the incident was to tighten the state’s grip over EIASC leadership to ensure that similar incidents would not happen in the future. The state also used the EIASC to its own advantage, to mobilize the Muslim communities to consolidate its power base. The result has been the de-institutionalizing of the reform movement. The characteristics of the reform movements, thus, hinged upon the personal network of the leader.

As the influence of Wahhabism increased, there were attempts to control the EIASC, with the hope of reforming Islamic practices among the wider Muslim community. In the second half of the 1990s, Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters succeeded in acquiring positions as representatives of the EIASC. The new alliance of the state in the GWOT, the increasing polemical interactions with the Christians and the intra-religious conflict that destroyed traditional mosques, forced the state to closely scrutinize the reform movements in Islam. Part of the strategy was to ensure that EIASC leadership was not supporting Wahhabism, as this puritan reform movement’s members are accused of being radical and intolerant. By 2004, the leadership of the EIASC was clearly anti-Wahhabist and to identify as such resulted in dismissal from the leadership.

Despite the fact that the leadership of the EIASC was freed from the influence of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, it was unable to control the growing movement of its influence. Most of the old mosques and the newly built ones as well were beyond its effective control. In effect, thus, besides the official representation the actual impact of the EIASC among the Muslim communities was minimal. There was also a growing level of dissatisfaction with the performance of the institution and its allegiance to the ruling party. The result was the proliferation of individual preachers who were proficient in Arabic and the growth of their impact among younger Muslims.

Salafi-Wahhabi-oriented Muslim preachers also changed their approach significantly. The tone of their message towards Sufi-oriented practices became one of sympathy rather than strong condemnation. Besides a sympathizing stance, the preachers also followed the ways of Arab-descendant Islamic apologists. Their preaching also extolled the virtues of Islam and being Muslims. They defended and reconstructed Ethiopian Muslim history to create a sense of pride among the Muslim communities who lived very long under the shadow of Christian monarchs. The result has been the creation of religious celebrities among the Muslim communities that the young look to for inspiration. The existing leadership vacuum thus falls into the hands of loosely connected preachers. The actual role of the EIASC among the Muslim communities was thus effectively reduced to its pre-2004 position.

In a way, the quest to control the EIASC was renewed after 2004. In the preaching of the dais (Islamic preachers) after 2004, the new direction was one of personal piety, and the prominence
of doctrinal controversies was in decline. Given that Ethiopian Islam is characterized by fragmentation and a loss of central authority, one would wonder about the primary motive behind the fierce competition to control the leadership of the EIASC. The validity of the question emanates from the fact that various reform interpretations had been operating in the country and had managed to build a strong base since 1991 without using the EIASC structure. For example, there are mosques that Muslims clearly identify as mosques promoting Wahhabi interpretations of Islam. The Shaho Jeli Masjid, Kera Masjid, and Ayer Tena Masjid in Addis Ababa are considered to be run and financed by the Wahhabi. Why then did the EIASC suddenly become a target? The reason is mainly related to the new policy direction of the state towards Islam. Chapter 6 documented how the perception of the state towards radical Islam changed towards the end of 2008.

The role and significance of the EIASC in the Muslim communities was resurrected in 2009. The state’s new direction, to contain the growing religious radicalism among the Muslim communities renewed its partnership with the EIASC. With the support of the state, and serving as nationwide representatives of the state, the EIASC saw its sphere of influence start to increase. In these renewed roles, however, the EIASC did not recover from its earlier legitimacy deficit. As the EIASC started to increase its sphere of influence, conflict ensued. The support of the EIASC leaders for the 2008 Ministry of Education regulations that restrict religious activities in educational institutions created another void in religiously vibrant youth. The draft regulation regulated dress codes and worship within academic institutions. In the draft regulation, there was a prohibition on religious activities within the compounds of academic institutions. The banning of communal prayers and wearing of niqāb on the grounds of enforcing the secular constitution met with strong opposition. The ban on individual prayer and the wearing of hijab felt like an attack against Islam, resulting in waves of protests in Addis Ababa and the countryside.

The year 2009 marked a change in state policy from interfaith dialogue to pre-emptive measures. The measures were against the growing Islamic radicalism in Ethiopia, which caused both interreligious and intra-religious rivalry in the religious landscape. Part of the approach was to promote strong institutionalism. Inherent to the new direction was also the state’s perception that Wahhabism is a strong destabilizing force that has to be contained. It seems that in the assessment of the state, the EIASC’s capacity to fulfill the new task was inadequate. The new role assigned to the EIASC was to tame the young and vibrant loosely connected advocates of Wahhabism. A training document of the EPRDF states (EPRDF, 2011b, p. 7):

*The religious education given is mostly in traditional ways. Warning religious adherents is limited to ordering them to preserve carefully their faith. These methods are not on par with the modern system of our globe. As a result, there is a void; a fully capacitated force that*
effectively combats and corrects extremist ideology is missing. Unless radicalism propaganda is combated with knowledge and information through democratic means, defending against and convincing radicals is impossible and adherents will continue to be victims of radicalism and rent-seeking behaviors (My own translation from the original Amharic).

According to WikiLeaks (2009), the above assessment was also shared by the US embassy of Ethiopia. According to this document, the locally educated religious leaders’ intellectual readiness to resist foreign-trained, young, Wahhabi-oriented clerics was not up to par. As a policy direction, the documents suggest the local leaders needed strong support for strengthening their intellectual repository in line with the orthodox but tolerant interpretation of Islam. It seems that the state’s own assessment and the suggestion of the US state made the capacity building of the EIASC a priority agenda for the state. If the local leaders were on par with the state’s requirement of a fully capacitiated religious force to combat radicalism, then the EIASC needed to seek an alliance that has the intellectual capability, the experience, and the finance to respond effectively to the challenge. One of the longstanding complaints of EIASC leaders about Wahhabi interpreters of Islam was the EIASC’s inability to match the resources mobilized by the Wahhabi. Naturally, due to its financial strength, its enmity to Wahhabism, and the founder being an Ethiopian, Al-Ahbash was a very good candidate to co-opt.

The 2011 violent incident that torched more than 50 Protestant churches and dozens of homes near Jimma, in the western Oromia region, brought renewed attention to Islamic extremism. The assessment of the state was the need to uproot radical influences through the leadership of the EIASC and the provision of constitutional training on the topic of religious extremism and radicalism. The new move consolidated the power of the EIASC, and as a result, it attempted to bring mosques throughout the nation under its leadership. Part of the strategy of controlling the mosques was deposing imams that followed the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretations of Islam.

In an effort to discredit the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, the EIASC co-opted as its ally Al-Ahbash. Nevertheless, the joining of hands with Al-Ahbash, an archenemy of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, made the EIASC itself a target. The recent interreligious competition between the two interpretations of Islam thus translated itself into maintaining absolute or at least substantial control over EIASC leadership. Even though they did not have many followers and mosques that identified in their name, Al-Ahbash had been operating in the country since 1995. The Wahhabi interpretation of Islam was also progressive, gaining a strong base among the Muslim population since 1991.
The stance of the state to stand with the EIASC and to co-opt the Al-Ahbash interpretation as an antidote to an increasingly politicized Islam was not inconsequential. The Salafi-Wahhabi preachers perceived the new direction as a threat to their very survival. The new state direction required a strategic reorientation and radical reorganization. With the new direction the anti-Wahhabi EIASC leaders started deposing Salafi-Wahhabi imams and appointing Sufi imams. By their actions, it became very clear that mosques were no longer competitive spaces between the two interpretations. The implication was not only that the future influence of Wahhabism would decline but also that the progressive gains already secured might be reversed, since there was a perceived fear that sheiks with a Wahhabi orientation would be deposed and anti-Wahhabi ones would be installed in their place.

The move of the EIASC immediately after it took the legal guardianship of the Awolia Muslim Mission School (AMMS) and the leadership’s immediate decision to close the Arabic department of AMMS and the intent to change its curriculum were huge blows against the Wahhabism teaching. The fact that the Al-Ahbash training that painted Wahhabism as the source of all evil preceded this decision turned the fear into clear and present danger. Ahmedin, the public relations head of the arbitration committee, remarked in his speech to the dissidents, “…Not only Awolia but also the Mosques, madrasahs and all the rest of the institutions of Muslims that the communities secured through various kinds of struggle cannot be controlled by Al-Ahbash through the agency of EIASC” (Negashi, 2015).

With the new direction, the fate of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam was relegated to the private sphere, and its space within the Muslim community as well as the larger public was subjected to scrutiny. In such a context, responding to the state’s new direction became a matter of survival. The years from 1991 onward gave prominence to young, self-appointed, and educated religious scholars who have a strong support base. In the new struggle, however, it was not sufficient to have a handful of supporters that increased over time. Thus, the dissidents needed a new image that would mobilize the Muslim community against the administrations of the EIASC. Among the revitalized young Muslim communities who adore prominent local and international preachers of a Salafi-Wahhabi orientation the EIASC’s image became one of an institution that has become inept, useless and politically affiliated with the state. Thus, it did not benefit the Muslim communities. Indeed, over time, the EIASC lost its legitimacy among the Muslim communities.

After 2011, however, the narrative had to be changed. It became clear that it was through the EIASC that the Al-Ahbash interpretation was attempting to gain a strong footing and undermine the “true interpretation” of Islam. The EIASC had to come to the center of discussion among the Muslim communities. In the new narrative, its formative days were cherished, creating a sense of nostalgia and lament for the loss of a strong nationwide Islamic institution. In reality, however, the role of the
EIASC throughout the Derg period was very much limited. Few of its success stories related to its formation and the faithfulness of its founders to the cause of Islam and the benefit of Muslims. While the dissidents extolled the prestigious days of the EIASC, they painted its recent condition as corrupt, ineffective, and backward. The prestigious days of the EIASC were depicted as the period of the socialist Derg government. The very hallmark of the new characterization was a further degeneration, as the EIASC was moving from uselessness towards becoming anti-Islamic.

In this new image of an inept EIASC, the role of the Islamic Diaspora associations is significant. The first in the list of the 13 requests of the representatives of the Ethiopian Diaspora delegate forwarded to the late Meles Zenawi was related to the issue of the EIASC. The request was for the reorganization of the EIASC and the immediate assignment of legitimate leaders to replace the existing ones (EMDAC, 2007, pp. 4-5). In fact, in the present public protest also, the first public opposition against the Al-Ahbash training in Ethiopia came not from AMMS but rather from the First Hijra Foundation (FHF), a US-based Ethiopian Muslim organization. The members staged a protest in front of the US State Department demanding that the US state stop its aid to the state since it was suppressing religious freedom (Al-Hashimi, 2012, p. 76). The Badr Ethiopian Muslim organization, a Diaspora Muslim organization which is in the US, also gave further intellectual impetus to the opposition by writing a book titled የኢትዮጵያ መጅሊስ አጣዳፊ እና አማራጭ መፍቴዎቹ (The Ethiopian EIASC: Its acute problems and alternate solutions) in July 2012 (Jemal, 2012b). The book examines in detail the EIASC’s historical background, its legal base and bylaws, and its challenges, long-term and short-term solutions, and alternatives.

The promotion of one interpretation of Islam over the other hinges mainly upon successfully discrediting the opposing interpretations as enemies of Islam and implicating them as deviant from the mainstream interpretation. The EIASC understands the mainstream view as ከወር ከሆነ ከማሳቀመሆን (indigenous Islam). For dissidents, however, the mainstream view implies Islamic doctrines and practices that are in line with the Quran and the Hadith. They generally reject the term indigenous, since it undermines the universal nature of the religion and the term connotes divisiveness. They feel at home, however, with the designation of Ethiopian Islam. In contradistinction to indigenous Islam, which connotes the fusing of Islamic practices with local cultures and thereby the accommodation also of unorthodox practices, Ethiopian Islam connotes the fact that Islam has become part of historical and cultural heritage (EMDAC, 2007, p. 2). Advocacy has been the approach of both, and to this end, opponents and proponents of the two interpretations produce abundant polemical materials.

Quite interestingly, however, the two interpretations have different media on their sides, and opinions are polarized. The state’s media stance clearly supports the positions of the EIASC and incriminates the Wahhabi form of interpretations, while the private media supports the activists, and
each monopolizes their respective spheres. It should be noted that as the state media is not neutral, neither are the private media. The private media characteristic, in general, is that of a critical voice against the state and supportive of the political opponents of the state. The Internet and Voice of America Amharic radio are relatively neutral competitive spaces where advocates of each make appearances to voice their respective perspectives, as well as taking part in debates and making their debates accessible to the public. From both sides, the rhetoric follows a sensibility argument, where primacy is given to emotion over reason and intuition over evidence.

The available materials of the two narratives are produced both in offline and in online contexts. The offline printed materials are uploaded through scanning, and in a similar way, offline preachings are uploaded for online viewing. The online materials are also immediately translated into an offline context. The online radio broadcasts and documentaries are downloaded and distributed. Similarly also blogs and Facebook updates, as well as online books, are printed and circulated among the Muslim communities. What is offline is available online, and the same is true of online productions, since they are also made available in an offline context either by being printed or through CDs. The translation of materials from one context to the other is to circumvent the shortcomings of the two contexts. The translation into online is done to achieve speed, circumvent censorship, and expand horizons of influence beyond the nation’s physical border in order to include the Diaspora communities and rights activists. The translation of online materials into offline is to increase its impact factor among the local communities, which do not have Internet access and are often illiterate. Thus limiting the influence of online data only to those who have access to the Internet has serious flaws.

In the discourse, there seems to be no room for tolerance and coexistence. Proponents of each interpretation chide their opponents and do not show any signs of kindness and moderation. The other is beyond correction, and each exhibits the highest level of conviction in their positions. The polemic is very sharp and characterized, for example, by the attempt to discredit the idea of the opponents by discrediting their persons. Supposedly, the other is caught red-handed “lying” and “misrepresenting.” The Internet has also provided the possibility for everyone to turn into an instant expert after visiting websites. The battle is done in the spirit of winning, as one should stand as the guardian of the “true Islam” and the other has to fall. Quoting long phrases in Arabic has also become a sign of authority. No one conceives the possibility that the two could both continue. As a result, the two interpretations portray themselves as guardians of Ahl al-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa’ah, the ones who follow the way of the prophet and his companions without any deviation or innovation. With the discourses, correct practices and doctrines are increasingly gaining prominence over subjective experiences, attitudes, and purity of motives.
The review of Islamic newspapers, Islamic online radio broadcasts, social media, and preaching indicates that much of the success hinges on successfully implicating Al-Ahbash as an enemy of the Ethiopian Muslim communities that is effectively controlling the EIASC leadership. In an attempt to discredit the alternate interpretation of Islam, the acclaimed founders, their history, theological foundations, and closer associations are under microscopic scrutiny. Part of the narrative of the dissidents is also the Ethiopian state. The motivation of the state varies. To some it is the pressure of conservative Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, for others it is fanatic Protestants, and for the others a state with the intent of amassing financial benefit and legitimacy from the West and the United States. Beneath the West and the US lies also Israel, an ultimate enemy of Islam that invented, finances, and sustains Al-Ahbash. On February 1, 2012 at a gathering at Awolia Mission School, Munir Ahmed presented an emotionally laden poem that led the dissidents to cry out loud. In it, he remarked about Al-Ahbash (Munir, 2012, p. 31):

\[ \text{በሚሆድ ያመሆድ ያብባሪ (Who profits in my name, a complicit of the Jew)} \]
\[ \text{ቅቤ እንጉት 19 ፈቁፋይ መሆን እatoria ኡነር (Pretentious as a caring Muslim but divisive)} \]

(My own translation from the original Amharic).

As agents of signification, these activists articulate and disseminate collective action frames that aim to mobilize potential adherents, sway bystanders, and demobilize antagonists. As one of the documentaries, titled *Conspiracy of the Ethiopian state & the Ahbash cult against Ethiopian Muslims*, implied, the mobilization effectively hinged on depicting the overall controversy as a great conspiracy against Ethiopian Muslims. Noting that activists are central in the interpretation of grievances and their diffusion, this section presents the perspective of the dissidents. On the positive side, also dissidents are urged to take part in the historic and sacrificial struggle that intends to protect Islam.

### 8.4 Which Narrative?

In the following two sub-sections, I look at the two competing narratives. In the first section (8.4.1), I look into the dissidents’ narratives of state interference. In the second section (8.4.4), I discuss the Islamic radicalism narrative of the state.

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19\text{አንጉት} is an idiom that defies direct translation from Amharic. What it connotes is a pretentious act of performing the impossible.
8.4.1 State interference

The dissenting Muslims’ characterization of the state has become እሁኔታ ውጤት ከውን (indoctrination campaign of Al-Ahbash). The Amharic words Yematimeq (baptizing) and Zemecha (campaign) are not Islamic terminologies but echo historic incidents of the Christian monarchs against Ethiopian Muslims. Zemecha alludes to the edict of Yohannes IV (reigned, 1872–89). That edict forced Wállo Muslims to convert to Christianity out of the misconceived perception that the Ethiopian Muslims might join the neighboring Muslim countries that were intruding into Ethiopian territory. Inherent to the designation is the state’s intervention against the Muslim communities with the intent to bring about a lasting solution to a problem with a sense of immediacy.

In the contemporary context, the campaign refers to a two-week long training provided in July 2011 to Muslim clerics with the intent of combating religious radicalism. The trainers were from Lebanon, and they followed Al-Ahbash interpretations of Islam and were very critical towards the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. Upon invitation, state officials attended the training to educate attendees on religious radicalism from the perspective of the constitution. The state also prepared a venue in the Ghion Hotel for an awareness campaign to which the private media, the EIASC officials, religious leaders from various Christian traditions, and its own MoFA personnel were invited. The participants had also the opportunity to interact through questions and answers.

The characterization of the state as Abbashin Yematimeq Zemecha contests the perceived motive and means of the state. Yematimeq refers to baptism, a rite of conversion to Christianity. For the dissidents, the state is forcing Muslims into another religion, Al-Ahbash. In the image construction of opponents, Al-Ahbash is not an Islamic interpretation but rather an enemy of it. In the assessment of the dissidents, like the historic Yohannes IV, the state is wrong in both its assessment (the radicalization of its Muslim population) as well as the means (a forceful indoctrination of Al-Ahbash through the agency of the EIASC) to bring about the change.

In order to organize the protest, the Muslim activists and dissidents made use of Islamic newspapers, magazines, social media, mobile technologies, online radio networks, and community meetings besides the available private secular media. Central to the narrative of the protesters was the Ethiopian state, in cooperation with the “illegitimate” EIASC, forcefully imposing and sponsoring a deviant sect. The actions of the EIASC against AMMS were also interpreted as an important hallmark to dismantle the only Islamic institution capable of resisting the indoctrination of the “new sect.”

To the dissidents, the new EIASC leaders are “illegitimate” on two grounds. First, the leaders are conspiring against Islam and Muslims by imposing the Al-Ahbash interpretation against the will

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20 Cognizant that the designation does not appeal to the Christian communities, some activists add Ye Susenyo Zemen (age), an Ethiopian king who reigned from 1607 to 1632 and who passed an edict that Orthodox Christians should convert into Catholicism following his conversion.
of Ethiopian Muslims. The implication is that the EIASC leadership is theologically illegitimate since it does not represent the “true Islam.” Second, the 5-year office limit of the EIASC leadership has long been overdue. The last election conducted for the office of the EIASC was 12 years ago. In the eyes of the law, thus, the EIASC leadership is transgressing its own bylaws.

In less than a month, the protest grafted itself onto the wider Muslim community and became a nationwide movement called ጋርወር ይስማ (Let our voice be heard). The initial perception of the protest movement framed the “illegitimate” EIASC as the greater enemy and the main architect. The attempt was to discredit the EIASC in the eyes of the state by stressing the fact that the bylaws require an election every 5 years and the last election was conducted 12 years ago. The approach has been that the state sides with the majority and that continues to refer themselves as ያሮሊዎኖች ድምጽ (voice of the millions). As the state continued to side with the leadership of the EIASC, the image of the state turned from an ally the protesters should co-opt to an archenemy whose impositions they should resist. In the newly developed narrative, the anti-Islamic policies of the state are not at all new. For the Muslim activists, the new policies are simply the open display of the typical policies that the state has been carrying out behind the scene.

The self-ascribed role of the dissidents has become one of the guardians against the enemies of Islam. The motto that united the protesters was ዩስማዴን መንገድ ገውልን! (Leave the heavenly way for us!). The protesters not only endorsed but also advocated constitutional clauses that strictly separated religion from the state. Dissidents accuse the state of interfering in the internal affairs of Muslims by siding with the “illegitimate” EIASC and sponsoring the teachings of Al-Ahbash, which goes beyond the constitutional mandate.

The dissenting Muslims characterize the association between the EIASC and the state as ይልተፈለገ ይብቻ (unwanted marriage), and the overall quest is framed as a move to ensure that the leadership of the EIASC divorces from the state. In this narrative, the state is a major architect of a nefarious scheme plotted against Islam, the EIASC is the main apparatus, and the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam is the means. The dissidents consider themselves as the true voices of the Ummah (the Muslim community), and its elected leaders’ designation became the Amir (leaders) of the movement. Besides the 17 members of the dissidents committee and a handful of very well known activists, the movement operates in stealth. The conflation of the EIASC, a religious institution, and the secular state as common opposition objects derived from a perception that the former has become the state’s contrivance to suppress the voices of the Muslim communities.
8.4.2 Religious radicalism

The state also has its own counternarrative. For the state, the overall protest is politics disguised in religion. In this counternarrative, the leaders of the protest are part of a wider international network plot. They are people that amass wealth from chaos and instability. In the state’s public media the usual designation of the protest leaders and their followers is as ከጉራ ረትሷት ይህን ከወራ መሆኑ ከስራ ረትሷት ይህን ከሚስ ይህን ከስራ መሆኑ ከስራ ረትሷት (a few Salafi Wahhabi radicals who are financially motivated). The label’s intent is to frame, trivialize, and securitize the protesters. In the state’s characterization, the protest engineers are a few pecuniary motivated individuals who envision the establishment of an Islamic state and the imposition of Sharia upon the religiously diverse citizens.

In the narration of the state, demanding the imposition of Sharia in a religiously pluralistic and constitutionally secular nation is clearly a sign of religious radicalism. Religious radicalism to the state is an extremist interpretation of Islamic religious texts as authoritative to govern all areas of life, and the intent to impose the same interpretation upon others thereby undermines the ideals of a secular state. The dissidents, however, clearly deny the accusation that their intent is the imposition of Sharia beyond family matters, surpassing the Ethiopian constitution. Even if the protesters applaud the Sharia law as supreme of all, they assert that it is not applicable to a nation like Ethiopia, which is religiously diverse. The narrative of the state intertwines the religious cause with non-religious radicalism that is primarily motivated by pecuniary interest.

To the state, the leaders of the dissent and their narratives are deceitful; the public faces are different from the behind-the-scene reality of the movement leaders. The religious interference narrative of the dissidents about the state is thus essentially a strategic choice to mobilize the Muslim communities and others. EIASC leaders also characterize the leaders as Wahhabist, people who overtly oppose but covertly espouse radicalism and are willing to use any means including deception as long as it helps their cause. The state quotes EIASC leaders as religious authorities to strengthen its own radicalism claim. The state subsumes cultural imperialism, the forceful imposition of the Arabs’ culture upon Ethiopian Muslims, under the radicalism narrative. Thus, the protest is a foreign-funded instigation against the long-standing ethos of culturally enriched Ethiopian religious tolerance. The ultimate enemies that instigate the youth against the state are thus the Gulf States, with the intent of exporting religious radicalism that threatens the historically accommodating culture of the nation and thereby subverting the secular constitutional provisions.

The narratives of the state, radicalization and cultural imperialism from the Middle East, created a sense of ambivalence about how to view the protest. In the state narrative, the Middle East refers mainly to Saudi Arabia and Qatar and only secondarily to the rest of the Gulf States. Part of the ambivalence is that the Christian communities have increasingly experienced a growing level of religious fundamentalism that has eroded the social infrastructures with the Muslim communities.
The divide between Christians and Muslims has increased. The polemical discourses of Christians and Muslims are also not without effect.

The widespread perception among Ethiopian Christians that stereotypes Arabs as anti-Ethiopian forces also played a role in the credibility of the state’s narrative. The chanting of Arabic slogans in the demonstrations of the mosques has also created uneasiness among the Christian communities. The chanting of a slightly modified slogan from the Arab Spring, *ash-sha'ab yurid isqat al-Majlis* (The people want the Majlis to step down), added to the suspicion that the movement has a political agenda and was inspired by the Arab Spring. Some Christians also cannot understand the questioning of religious freedom, as many Muslims continue to worship their God freely, even in the street, using their prayer rug. They ask, “What more freedom could be given than that?” and “Who else has more freedom?”

Even if sporadic, the recent violence and sporadic incidents of 2006 and 2011 that led to the burning of churches and the death of Christians intensified the fear. These violent incidents against the Christian communities by Islamic extremists thus somehow added credibility to the narratives of the state. The Wahhabist perception among the Christian communities is that of religious radicalism, people who say “ከእኔ እላ እንር! (No one should exist, except me!).” In the discourse, the interference of the state in religious affairs and the radicalization of Islam has become the central issue. The state has frequently employed the nation’s accommodating religious past to discredit the protest movement leaders. The stateidealizes the Ethiopian religious communities as historically tolerant and discredits the movement leaders as intolerant.

In a limited sense and precautionary manner, opposition party leaders also joined the debate. They are of the opinion that the Islamic religious radicalism claim of the state is totally unfounded. To the opposing political parties, the radicalism charge that the state espouses is merely a political maneuver. It is the same technique the state used against the EOTC that is now in a dexterous manner being extended to Islam to put it under its grip. It is a strategy to prolong the state’s power through a divide and rule strategy. To them, the present state interference in religious matters is not as such new but rather an extension of the state’s disposition to control every aspect of the people. The opposition political parties’ motivation to support the protest movement was motivated by political expediency and it did not last long. The dissident leaders also distanced themselves from political activism with the fear that the state would implicate them with political motives. The Diaspora communities, however, attempted to marshal support also from the opposition parties.

For the state and the EIASC, signs of radicalization are very evident and real. The point of departure is that signs of radicalization are mounting and it should be contained before it becomes too late. In this line of reporting, the emphasis is on pointing out the mosques burned, the harassment and the death of imams, the destruction of holy shrines, the loss of ancient religious books, and the
increasing intra-religious tensions. The perceived culprit behind the radicalization of Ethiopian Muslims is singled out as the influence of Wahhabism. Wahhabism for the state and the EIASC is an intolerant version of Islam sponsored by the rich Gulf States. In its orientation, Wahhabism is anti-Islamic, anti-diversity, divisive, and foreign. On October 5, 2011, in a religious discussion forum dealing with the role of the media in combating radicalism, the minister of MoFA made public that the state had classified Wahhabism as extremist since its actions are against the nation’s constitution. The state classification of extremism was based on its teaching (intolerance towards other religions) and its activities (for the establishment of an Islamic state governed by Sharia) (Reporter, 2011).

Reportedly, the title of Al-Ahbash training for Muslim clerics in June 2011 was “The many evils caused by Wahhabism.” To the EIASC, then, the only way of curbing such an extremist influence is the promoting of an indigenous Islam that is tolerant and accommodating in spirit and stands against Wahhabism. The Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam falls under the category of Ethiopian Islam and by implication inherits the virtues of Ethiopian Islam, tolerance and accommodation. Wahhabism is presented as an unchanging ideology that does not adjust itself to local contexts. Its followers are also framed as individuals that translate the ideology directly into practice without subjective interaction, ignoring contextualization. The dissidents are accused of having a political agenda, despite the fact that they openly reject such a characterization and espouse a secular state as the only way forward for religiously diversified nations like Ethiopia.

The dissidents, on the contrary, frame the overall discourse in light of state interference against the constitutional mandate. They contend that there is radicalization among Ethiopian Muslims. To the dissidents, radicalization is confused with the revitalization of religion. The sense of unease with the state is not a matter of evidence but rather of an inherent distrust towards Islam as it becomes an identity for mobilization. The presumption is that whenever human rights language and activism are included, the manifestation of Islam is crossing the boundary of being a peaceful religion. The overall discourse of the radicalization of Islam is that of the West, devoid of Ethiopian reality on the ground. What lies behind the protesters’ conviction is that the state and the EIASC in cooperation are promoting a sect in Islam that is actually anti-Islamic. Al-Ahbash for them is theologically deviant from mainstream Islam, radical in its orientation towards the Muslim communities, and favorably disposed towards the enemies of Islam (the West and Israel). Al-Ahbash is not part of Ethiopian Islam, but rather it is an innovation and conspiracy against Ethiopian Muslims.

Under the section of “Which narrative?” I discussed the two competing narratives, the dissidents’ narrative of state interference and the religious radicalization narrative of the state. In the narrative of state interference, I showed that the dissidents equate the historic edict of Yohannes IV that required the Muslim communities to convert into Christianity to the state campaign that intends
to promote the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam. To advance the religious radicalism narrative, the state has also employed the recent interreligious conflicts and intra-religious conflicts. Moreover, in cooperation with the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam, it has classified Wahhabism as an intolerant religious ideology that causes discord in the religiously tolerant and accommodative culture.

8.5 The Disaspora Ethiopian Muslims

In relation to the beginning of the protest, the role of the Diaspora Ethiopian Muslim community was not trivial. From the start, the protest enjoyed an enormous impetus from Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora communities that clearly showed allegiance to the movement. In fact, the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora communities were the first to react in opposition to the training that the EIASC and the state provided with the cooperation of Al-Ahbash-oriented interpreters (teachers) of Islam. Particularly, the Belgium-based Luqman Ethiopian-Muslims Association (LE MBA) and the US-based First Hijrah Foundation (FHF) Diaspora associations voiced their protest before Ethiopian Muslims in Ethiopia.

On November 7, 2011, the chairperson of LEMBA, Abiye Yassin Ibrahim, requested the state to “annul immediately the marriage with Ahbash” (ESAT, 2011a, p. 229). On November 21, 2011, months before the first public protest in Addis Ababa, the Diaspora Muslims in the US made the first demonstration in Washington, framing the training as an assault against religious freedom. The slogans the protesters carried included, “We will not accept the religious leaders that the Ethiopian state appointed!” and “All unelected Mejlis religious leaders must step down!” (ESAT, 2011b). The analogy of marriage and the state-appointed leaders are persisting themes throughout the protest.

The Diaspora Muslims’ voices are also present throughout the movement. In solidarity with the protest, the Diaspora communities in Europe, the Gulf States, and Africa also made periodic mass demonstrations. Besides public demonstrations that gave the movement international publicity, the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora communities are very active in publishing documentaries that discredit the EIASC and the state, operating Internet-based new Islamic radio outlets that provide venues for alternate narratives and discourses, administering websites that disseminate the protest-related news and analysis, and supporting the movement financially.

The Diaspora communities’ documentaries painted Al-Ahbash as an anti-Islamic, pro-Western, and pro-Israeli sect. Such depictions played a significant role in both conserving and bolstering the activism. The Diaspora communities also commemorate the movement by organizing annual events and issuing periodic statements that show solidarity with the movement. The depiction of the dissidents, and more so of the Diaspora Muslim community and the state, heavily employed the historical relations. The claim of the dissidents is that oppressive religious policies of the previous
regimes towards Islam continue in the present state, while the state claims that the religious freedom Muslims presently enjoy is historically unprecedented and radically improved.

8.6 The Politics of “Othering”

The state, via its allegiance to the EIASC, supports the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam and marginalizes Wahhabism as a strategy to combat the perceived religious radicalism growing among the Muslim communities. Despite the state’s denial, its favorable disposition towards the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam is obvious. The late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, in his speech to the House of Parliament on April 17, 2012, extolled the Al-Ahbash interpretation as የንፋስ እስልምና (indigenous Islam) and tolerant. On the contrary, his depiction of the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation was very negative. He presented it as foreign in origin and intolerant of religious plurality and the secular state’s constitutional ethos (ETV, 2012b). The depiction by Meles of the Ethiopian Sufi Muslims as indigenous and the Salafi-Wahhabi as imported capitalizes on the religious cultural capital. The EOTC and Ethiopian Muslims tend to admire localness in relation to religion and are suspicious of anything imported.

In the harrowing public protest days of 2012, the state gave unwavering support to the administration of the EIASC. The support of the state also continued thereafter, despite the growing level of the legitimacy deficit in the EIASC among the Muslim communities. The state media, Ethiopian Television, has also organized panel discussions and news coverage that clearly indicate its allegiance to the EIASC. Østebø (2013), for example, characterizes the new direction of the state as the promotion of its own form of “state Islam.” The administration of the EIASC vehemently denies the charge that the office is imposing a new interpretation of an imported Islamic interpretation named Al-Ahbash. They do not deny that religious trainers from Lebanon participated in the training of religious clerics on Islamic radicalism. Nevertheless, the problem lies in the trainers identifying themselves as followers of the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam.

To the EIASC leaders, the label Al-Ahbash is an imposition of the Wahhabi with the intent to discredit the indigenous Sunni Sufi Islam that Ethiopians Muslims have been practicing since the introduction of Islam in Ethiopia 1,400 years ago. Central to the debate is the characterization of Al-Ahbash. The question is whether Al-Ahbash is foreign to indigenous Ethiopian Islam or an extension of indigenous Ethiopian Islam beyond Ethiopia. Dissident Muslims espouse the first understanding, while the EIASC and the state claim the latter.

The administration of the EIASC dismisses the charge that the Lebanese trainers of Al-Ahbash signify foreignness. Their argument is that the trainers were students of an Ethiopian sheik who was exemplary in spreading the indigenous and tolerant Ethiopian form of Islam throughout the world. The Ethiopian origin of the leader thus ensures the continuity and the spreading of indigenous Islam.
beyond Ethiopia. For the dissidents, however, Al-Ahbash is a deviation that had its genesis in Ethiopia and grew into a sect in Lebanon. To the dissidents, as a new sect, it brought a completely deviant understanding of Islam under the guise of support for a heretic Shia in Syria, with the support of Israel and the West.

The labeling goes two ways. The dissenting Muslims avoid the label Wahhabi as a self-designation due to both pragmatic and theological concerns. The initial spread of Wahhabism in many parts of the world was characterized by its intolerant stance towards indigenous Sufi-related and folk Islam practices. Its initial proponents were also the young, who did not understand well their contexts. This is evident in the fact that they waged war against deeply ingrained cultural practices and perceived Muslims’ cordial relations with their Christian neighbors as unhealthy and as compromising the teachings and practices of Islam. In the opinion of reform-oriented preachers, the cordial relationship with Christians led to the infiltration of non-Islamic ideas, such as the celebration of እንቁጣጣሽ (New Year). Muslims accompany the tabot (Ark of the Covenant) in the EOTC celebration of religious festivities, which is considered among some reformers as an unnecessary rapprochement. The new proposal calls for the strict demarcation of identities, which has contributed to the deterioration of cordial relations. As a result, the title Wahhabi invokes negative connotations among the elderly Muslims. Among the Christian communities, the term signifies religious radicalism and cultural imperialism imported from the rich Gulf States, mainly from Saudi Arabia.

The 1990s and early 2000s’ negative stance and animosity towards Sufi has significantly dwindled over time among those who advocate a strict interpretation of Islam in light of the Quran and the Hadith. In this regard, the 2007 visit of the Muslim Diaspora played a significant role. The debate forum between the `ulama of Salafi-Wahhabi and the Sufi paved a way for the former to sympathize with the latter as theologically deficient. Such a shift is evident, given that the softened stance of some preachers caused vitriol among Salafi-Wahhabi for representing a defiled version of Islam. This was a strategic choice, as the immediate focus of some Wahhabi-Salafi preachers was directed towards cultivating unity.

One of the mottos of the 2012 public demonstrations was ዓስፋለፋርعطاء እናልፋነን (Mawlid does not divide us). In the protest movement, theological differences among Muslims have been downplayed. They have become secondary in importance compared to the perceived threat that the Al-Ahbash interpretation poses. This new direction does not at all accommodate development in the theological outlook that counts the perspectives of the Sufi as a viable authentic alternative. Most sympathizers of popular Islam continue to characterize Muslims who supplicate to deceased holy men as ዓሸፋነርሆፋኔ እናይለት ግጥ (grave worshippers). What has changed, however, are the investigation of the cause and the means of correcting it. The Sufi and traditional folk Islam adherents are no longer considered guilty
of polytheism (shirk) and Kufr (unbelief) but rather are seen as ignorant and in need of religious education.

Besides the negative connotation of the name Wahhabi among Christians and elderly Muslims, the supporters of the interpretation do not appreciate its use on theological grounds. The dissidents withhold the popular presumption that Islam signifies a monolithic universal religion, whose practices and teachings should be immune to cultural diversity. In this view, Islam’s doctrines and practices are determined only through the study of the Quran and the Hadith as interpreted and lived by the first three pious generations. To claim Wahhabism as a self-designation that is equivalent to endorsing following the 18th century interpreter is thus contrary to their theology.

In the dissidents’ theological reasoning, the prevailing differences among practicing Muslims are lags in understanding from the correct Islam or the direct results of engaging in innovations. Any deviation is not a legitimate form of expression but rather a deviation from the pure, and hence it calls for purging the un-Islamic aspect. The veneration of saints and the celebration are thus later inventions and un-Islamic. The wearing of hijab or niqāb signifies a proper religious observance and is a sign of Islamic modesty. In relation to dress codes, however, there is not a consensus. The bottom line has been the necessity for women to wear hijab, which the state accommodated in its Ministry of Education directives. Besides that, there is also a controversy among Muslims as to whether some women are wearing it improperly or not.

8.7 Discrediting the “Other”

In the following sections, I look at the strategy of discrediting the other as intolerant, divisive, political, and pecuniary-motivated. More specifically, I discuss how the state, the EIASC, and Al-Ahbash framed the dissidents as intolerant others (8.6.1). The dissidents also framed the state as an anti-Islamic state (8.6.2) and Al-Ahbash as an anti-Islamic “sect” (8.6.3) and a friend of the enemies of Islam (8.6.4).

8.7.1 The intolerant “other”

The founder of Al-Ahbash and his disciples see themselves as part of the mainstream Muslim community. They trace their understanding of Islam and theological interpretations to the early ninth century Arab scholars, the Fiqh of Al-Imam Al-Shafi’i and Ash'ari Aqeeda. Al-Ahbash adherents emphasize the Ethiopian origin of the founder and his teachers as credentials of authentic and tolerant indigenous Islam, usually setting this against Wahhabism, which they classify as intolerant and extremist. The founder of the interpretation is Sheikh Abdullah Muhammad Yusuf. His mother was Fatuma Abdullah. He had three brothers and one sister. His followers claimed that he was a student of a number of Sheikhs, which among others include: Ash-Sheikh Muhammad Abdus-Salam,
ash-Sheikh Muhammad Umar Jami, ash-Sheikh Muhammad Rashad, ash-Sheikh Ibrahim Abil-Ghayth, ash-Sheikh Yunus Al-Ahbashiyy, and ash-Sheikh Muhammad Siraj al-Jabarti. To his supporters, he was a great Ethiopian thinker and religious scholar who have studied under great Islamic personalities in Ethiopia.

Both the critics and the supporters of Al-Ahbash underplay the founder’s education outside Ethiopia, albeit for different reasons, the earlier to emphasize his religious scholarship void and the latter to extol the superiority of indigenous Ethiopian Islam. In both cases, his stay in Saudi Arabia is described as conflictual. For the dissidents, the clash signifies innovation, while for adherents the intolerant and radical Wahhabi clerics did not embrace his peaceful teachings. Controversy also surrounds the historical circumstances that led the founder to leave his country. In the narratives of the state and the EIASC, it is the absence of a conducive environment in the Haile Selassie state that led him to be a fugitive, along with his desire to learn. To the dissidents, the sheik left Ethiopia because both the Ethiopian scholars and the Islamic communities rejected him for promoting teachings that were deviant from Islam, for his association with the Christian king, and for creating division among the Muslim communities and working against their interests. The Al-Ahbash adherents, while disassociating themselves from the Saudi Arabian religious scholars, claim that his teaching was well received at the University of al-Azhar. His opponents, however, assert that such a claim is baseless and the same institute rejects him. The attempts of both indicate that they both envision themselves as part of the larger Islamic community.

The Lebanese Al-Ahbash interpreters attempted to establish ties with the wider Ethiopian Muslim community via the Ethiopian founder and attempted to create a feeling that they are also part of the same Sunni Islamic community. They see their role, as trainers in EIASC workshops, as those who fill an existing void in Islamic knowledge. They lament that the Wahhabi, whom they view as poisoned, has captivated the religious vitalization among the Muslim youth. One of the senior Al-Ahbash leaders, Samir Kadi, described their role as “warners.” The Lebanese trainers are in Ethiopia to warn and clear the confusion of the innocent youth poisoned with radical Islamic ideology. Their objective is to bring into right guidance those who drifted away from the right path of Islam. To them, people follow the way of the Wahhabi because of ignorance. They see themselves as people that tell truths so that deceptions and hidden agendas can become evident. Proponents usually attack the fiqh, Aqeedah, and the history and customs of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. To them, all indicate an un-Islamic element. Advocates of the Al-Ahbash interpretation are very harsh in their classification of Wahhabism (Firsthijrah, 2012).

It is not only the Lebanese trainers that speak negatively about the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam as intolerant and radical but also the local Sufi leaders. Sheik Abubakar Suleiman, for example, contrasted the Ethiopian Sufi Sunni Muslims with the Wahhabi. To him, “the Wahhabis,
unlike the Sunni Sufi Ethiopians, follow Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab,’ not Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdullah, the prophet of Islam’” (Ethiopiafirst, 2012). Salahadin Wazir, a representative of the EIASC in the Diaspora, remarked in a weekly English program on Ethiopian Television, “The mother of all extremism is Wahhabism” (EBC, 2014). Part of the discrediting is also identification and labeling. For example, defenders of the sheik discredit Inter-faith, Ethiopian Muslim communities, and the video chat group Bilal Paltalk as the voices of radical Wahhabi.

In the discrediting of the Wahhabi, the targets to convince are not only the Muslim communities but also the Christian communities. The strategy is similar, painting the Wahhabi as radical and intolerant. Both the state and EIASC-related Muslims endorsed as authentic the three-page document widely circulating among the Christians communities as radical Muslims’ plan for Ethiopia (EBC, 2014). According to the document, radical Muslims are conspiring with the intent of Islamizing Ethiopia within 25 years. This plan commenced from 2005, and it has three stages to be implemented within 5, 15, and 25 years.21 In the first 5 years, the ambition is creating unity and mobilizing the Muslim communities for Islamic ideals. The strategies outlined to this end are creating unity among Sufi and Wahhabi interpreters, developing strong Islamic missions and activists, increasing the number of Sharia courts, networking with Islamic organizations, strengthening international connections, encouraging a partisanship of Muslim officials for the causes of Islam, and establishing printing offices to disseminate the Islamic ideas. Within 15 years, the objective is to create an Islamic island, have Muslims governed under Sharia, control the power, establish strong Islamic institutions, purchase Christian organizations, create an Islamic university, take leadership in African Islamic communities, and register in the Arab League. The third stage is rather a mixture of a backup plan if the first two stages did not work out and a vision for the future. It requires preparation of the plan for jihad, increasing 60-fold the present mosques, and strong Islamic institutions. The plan ends with a slogan, “We struggle, our children win, and our grandchildren win the world through Islam.”

Theologically, opponents emphasize the idea that the Wahhabi conceive of God as a human being as if he resembles the creature. Unlike the Wahhabis, the proponents assert that visiting of holy shrines of saints is permissible, as is the celebration of Mawlid, the prophet’s birthday. Mawlid is the biggest center of controversy. They claim the Wahhabi consider the celebration as one of the greatest sins and say eating meat slaughtered for the ceremony is rotten and equivalent to eating pork. In relation to the celebration, they point out that they reject worshiping in a mosque where the imam permits the celebration of Mawlid and decree that following him in prayer is haram (forbidden and

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21 Except for a little effort at contextualization, the document seems to be a translation of a document that was circulated in the spring of 1990 as the Abuja Declaration. It is more likely that it is a forgery. The year 2005 was marked for an electoral controversy in Ethiopia and was just 1 year before the intra-religious conflict around Jimma that led to burning of churches.
unlawful practice). The Wahhabi have also instigated youth against such imams, eventually leading to their deposition and to division among the Muslim communities.

The Wahhabi are also charged with promoting religious exclusivity, refusing to pray after an imam who does not follow their ways. They have no room for accommodating differences. They are pretentious men and liars as long as it advances their cause. They are not men of religion but rather politicians. The acclaimed peaceful stance and the claim of being apolitical are only strategic and are inconsistent with their very foundation. Respect and living together with others has no room in their ideology. In the depictions, they have burned mosques, harassed religious leaders, and become a source of division among the Muslim population. I commonly heard informants saying, “The people and the religion both are new.” The movement is also implicated with Saudi money and the indoctrination is done in Saudi Arabia. The innocent and the young are fed with such ideology. Behind it, there is poisonous ideology, money, emptiness of mind, and lack of supervision.

8.7.2 The anti-Islamic state

Dissenting Ethiopian Muslims in the initial days provided a high score to the EPRDF’s stance on religious freedom. In May 2012, for example, the committee published a book titled ከውነቱ የህኝ! (This is the truth!), as part of its awareness campaign strategy. The attempt of the small book was to document that the committee acted in a transparent manner, its means were peaceful, and its approaches were legal and constitutional. To this end, it provided the list of issues raised and the processes undertaken and made public documents and letters that were submitted to various state offices. The introduction section remarked, “In the national elections, the support of the Muslims is openly expressed. Muslims believe the ruling party provides better freedom of religion not only in comparison to the previous states but also better than the existing opposition political parties.”

Clearly, in the assessment of the dissidents’ representatives, the EPRDF’s performance was better, both when gauged against the previous states and against contemporary political parties that are opponents of the EPRDF. In the document, the problem of the Muslim communities was not the state but the illegitimate EIASC (Dimitsachin-Yisema, 2012, p. 16). The 2007 assessment of the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora delegation was not very different. It praised the EPRDF’s approach to religion. Its complaint was against the leadership of the EIASC, which they thought does not represent the Muslim community, and a few public officials that acted in the spirit of partisanship towards their own religion and undermined the religious freedom of the other (EMDAC, 2007, p. 2). This positive assessment of the EPRDF in relation to freedom of religion, however, dramatically changed when the state imprisoned and charged the movement’s leaders with terrorism.

22 The publication was just a month prior to the imprisonment of the committee members on charges of terrorism.
Following the imprisonment of the leaders, there was a radical change in the perspectives of the dissidents. The imprisonment and the charge of terrorism challenged their assessment of events that unfold after that as well as of past encounters. After the imprisonment of the leaders, many “rediscoveries” about the EPRDF were diametrically opposite to the previous assessments. The EPRDF thus turned from a party that endowed religious freedom to a party that was acting covertly against the interests of Muslims. The state thus became the main agent working against Islam. In developing this narrative, as was almost the case in relation to the protest movement developments, the Muslim Diaspora took the lead on the initiative of painting negatively the relationship between the state and the Muslim communities.

The direction of a negative assessment by the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora communities, however, preceded the imprisonment of their leaders. The critical stance started immediately after the 2007 visits of the Muslim Diaspora delegates. The issuance of the 2008 proclamation governing NGOs and the draft MoE guideline limiting the freedom of religion within the compounds of educational institutions strained the relationship. The critical stance started in 2008 and increased in momentum to reach its apex in the 2011 November public protest. The Diaspora Muslim community in Washington made a public protest in which they asked the US to stop providing aid.23 The negative assessment solidified further in both the Diaspora and locally upon the circulation of a paper that analyzed the EPRDF’s policy towards Muslims.

Abdallah Adem Teki, the author, is a defunct member of the EPRDF and a Muslim. The document circulated online and earned such credibility among dissidents that online Islamic radio outlets narrated it. It is very rarely that Muslims who have been closely following the recent developments pass without mentioning it as a factual narrative. In the document, the EPRDF is construed as a political party that had anti-Islamic sentiments from its very formation, and the recent actions are deemed manifestations of long-held policy directions. The document states (2012, p. 10):

*There were circumstances that forced the EPRDF to make Muslims its ally.*24 The allegiance of the majority of Ethiopian Muslims indeed saved the EPRDF from electoral defeat. The EPRDF’s partnership with Muslims, however, is part of its usual strategy of throwing things away after use. The alliance did not change its long-held (probably even in the revolutionary times) anti-Islamic position, which it held even long before other countries began their anti-Islamic campaigns. The failure of implementing its anti-Islamic campaign was due to its occupation with other matters. Now the EPRDF blindly follows the global campaign against

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23 2008 refers to the year in which the Ministry of Education of Ethiopia issued a directive that limits certain forms of religious expressions in educational institutions, such as the prohibition of wearing niqāb and performing group prayers within educational institutions. For details, see MoE (2008).

24 This is referring to the 2005 election.
Islam. The EPRDF intentionally ignores the fact that its own internal party structure is anti-Islamic and its own Muslim population has a unique nature (My own translation from the original Amharic).

Muslim activists assert that it is’s benevolence of the Muslim community that helped the EPRDF to win the 2005 election. It clearly recognizes that the EPRDF co-opted the Muslim community as an ally, albeit for its own political end. Some might think this interpretation is an outlier in the new discourse. In fact, among the dissidents this view dominates. The popularity of the view is partly due to its wider availability. Its impact also increased after the existing Islamic radio outlets narrated it, and it served as solid evidence to collaborate the claims of Muslim activists. In terms of reorientation also, it radically reorganized the attitudes of the Muslim community, especially that of the Diaspora Muslim communities that are active online. At the beginning of the protest and in most of the discussions before that, their overall approach towards the state was to be informative. In the new depiction, the state became nefarious in its agenda. The major forces behind the state were a few state officials who were motivated religiously or miscalculated political gain.

The image of the great enemy that purportedly influenced the EPRDF has never been static but rather changed frequently, as circumstances required it. In the initial periods, the activists accused EOTC adherents of feeding negative images of Islam to the EPRDF. Prior to the 2008 MoE draft guideline, evangelicals were also accused of using state offices to proselytize the Muslim community. Before the 2011 protest, the culprits were characterized as fanatics from the religious landscape. Members of Mehabire Kidusan (association in the name of saints) from the EOTC and government officials who were Protestants influenced the state to view Islam in a negative light. Otherwise, it would have remained neutral, since in its ideology it does not care about religion except to mobilize it for political expediency. In this narrative, the state would not care about religions if not for the pressures of the Christian community. The overall perception was that the former had more impact on policy making and the latter was a practical challenge that targeted Muslims for proselytization (EMDAC, 2007, p. 13).

Mehabire Kidusan is a devoutly fundamentalist institution accused of influencing the issuance of policies that are against the interest of Muslim communities. For example, the 2008 Ministry of Education regulation that prohibits the wearing of niqāb related to the influence of Mehabire Kidusan (Negashi, 2009). Such an allegation regarding Mehabire Kidusan mainly derived from the activities of the association and the influence it has on Ethiopian higher institutions. The association perceives itself as guardian of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity’s doctrine, traditions, and history. Such a position naturally led to a polemical discourse with Muslim activists who claimed that the historical accounts of Ethiopian histories were not accurate and were biased in the favor of the church. Besides,
the historical materials as well as the polemic ones extended to doctrinal issues. In addition to the religious side, the state also perceived some of the association members as critical of the present state and its ethnic-based federalism and as extolling the older monarchical days. The accusation of the latter was in relation to Protestant state officials using their offices to proselytize the Muslim communities.

After 2011, the greater enemy evolved from religiously motivated EOTC and evangelical members into the EPRDF itself. The state’s image turned from an innocent manipulable object of opposition into a champion of a nefarious anti-Islamic agenda. With the new narrative, especially in the online Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora discussions, political analysis of the EPRDF became the center of attention. The online Islamic radio stations not only provided political analysis to the Muslim community but also urged them not to vote for the EPRDF. The Dimsachin Yisema Facebook page still refrains from engaging the EPRDF in political terms, probably out of fear that those political discussions will solidify the fear that Ethiopian Islam is increasingly politicized. It seems that the Dimsachin Yisema movement is better attuned to Ethiopian reality and pursues its goal more pragmatically than the Diaspora Muslim activists.

Muslim activists progressively developed a narrative that the EPRDF planned everything from the beginning. Such a narrative interpreted in retrospect various actions of the state as intentionally targeting the Muslim community. In this narrative, there were five strategies outlined by the state against Islam and Muslims. The first allegation related to Islamic propagation. The state viewed the Dawa activities of Muslims negatively, perceiving them as sources of Islamic radicalization. Most of the time this line of reasoning tended to compare Islamic Dawa with the freedom of evangelical Christianity, exemplified by the state officials displaying preference or a stance of neutrality towards evangelicals but distrust towards the Muslim communities. A young Muslim university student asked me a rhetorical question, “What do you think the state would do if Muslims, like Protestants, handed out Islamic materials on the street and preached using microphones?” His comment is not atypical. Muslims also claim that in practice the present state is not entirely secular. For example, the eight questions submitted to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2007 shared this tone (EMDAC, 2007, p. 13):

_In the Benshangul Gumz regional state, there is a movement led by the regional president that gives recognition only to one faith and its expansion while aiming to destroy the other. The office requested assistance from global mission organizations, and an American mission agency called the Blair Foundation accepted the request. The support is to build 1,000 churches in 2 years and to convert the people of the region to Christianity. The president in his term, rather than developing the region, has determined to convert the people to his faith._
if possible through deceit or otherwise through imposition. From various announcements, he has made it clear that he assumed the position to accomplish this. This indicates that what the president and his office stand for is not secret; rather, it is the policy of the regional state (My own translation from the original Amharic).

Very recently, however, the narrative has taken another detour, and evangelical Protestants are criticized more than others in forming a negative opinion towards Muslims. The allegations are from various directions. For some Muslim activists, evangelicals are pushing the state to view Muslims and their activities in light of religious radicalism. For the others, evangelicals easily fall prey to the influences of the state and the West, which are anti-Islamic in their orientation. The latter assessment is that of Abdallah Adem Teki. In his perspective, the intent of the EPRDF is the creation of a Christian-dominated (mainly Protestant) Ethiopia. Protestants are thus agents of the West. He argues that Nigeria and Ethiopia are considered as strategic allies for the anti-Islamic campaign of the West and have provided huge funds. The advantage of the Protestants is that due to their relations with the West, the EPRDF does not view their development works and the corollary evangelism with suspicion. This helps to explain the growth of Pentecostal-flavored Ethiopian evangelicalism, which doubled after the EPRDF took power.

In this narrative, the negative roles of the evangelicals extend also to the evangelical Diaspora community. The EPRDF also uses the Diaspora Ethiopian evangelical Christian associations to paint the present movement in a negative light. In the recent years, Ethiopian evangelicals in the Diaspora community increased their presence on the Internet, which was previously dominated by Ethiopian Muslim communities. In response to the interfaith dialogues that criticize the authenticity of the Christian scriptures and the lordship of Christ, the evangelicals started to emphasize the violent nature of Islam. With the new presence of evangelical communities, thus, the radicalism discourse in the Diaspora community increased. The activists also claim that, after the 2010 election, active members of Protestant communities who advance their causes increasingly dominate the EPRDF.25

Probably more than the concern for Islamic Dawa, the issue of educational institutions is a shared concern among the Muslim communities. Hijab and niqāb have been the center of controversy since the 1995 constitution. Before 2008, there were individuals who interpreted the constitutional clause requiring the educational sector to be secular as, by implication, prohibiting the wearing of hijab (mostly niqāb) within educational institutions’ compounds. In the year 2008, the Ministry of Education issued a directive that regulates worship-related practices in educational institutions. The directive has sections that have a direct bearing on Muslims.

25The year 2010 is the first time in Ethiopian history that a member of the Unitarian Apostolic Church (people consider him as Protestant) became a prime minister.
The directive provides two rationales. The first one refers to Article 90(2) of the constitution that requires educational institutions to be free of any influence from religion and culture. The implication of this clause was understood as provisions that demand education to be secular. The second rationale relates to equal treatment of religions. In this line, it argues that there should not be signs that differentiate among students on religious bases. In relation to Islam, section 6.2 prohibits the wearing of niqāb that cover the whole face but permits hijab as long as the color is similar to the school’s uniform others are wearing. Section 7.2 further prohibits group prayer for any religious adherents. Muslims consider these two sections of the directive to particularly affect the Muslim communities. To them, these provisions are designed against Islam and Muslims because it is only in Islamic religion that these are obligatory and in all the other religions they are not. The discussion of the directives is usually under the slogan, “Do not force us to choose between our education and our religion!”

In the narrative of dissidents, the weakening strategy of Ethiopian Muslims also encompasses the economic aspect. In this narrative, Ethiopian officials – for that matter, the opposition party too – were unhappy with the fact that the Muslim communities dominated the business centers. As a result, purportedly the EPRDF as a policy direction was doing its best to reduce the share of the Muslim communities. The alleged pieces of evidence are many. The first one comes from WikiLeaks, from the statement of an opposition party leader. Reportedly, Hailu Shawl told the US ambassador, “The money is now in Muslim hands," he said, adding that "(the ruling) Tigrayan are fighting for their cut but they get very little” (WikiLeaks, 2008b). Muslim activists interpreted the statement as if it implied that the EPRDF is working hard to undermine the Muslim communities in the business sector. What the statement simply asserts is that for historical reasons Muslims dominated the business landscape of Ethiopia and now the ruling ones are taking part in it. The second line of reasoning follows an argument that foreign Muslim investors are securitized, both in terms of their origin and in terms of operations. This argument basically relied on the suggestion of a Muslim cleric that defends the Al-Ahbash interpretation as a way of combating the influence of foreign funding in radicalizing Ethiopian youth (EBC, 2014).

Muslim activists also point out the political marginalization of Muslims in the structure of the EPRDF. It is also reported that the state recently launched a program called እንወት ያስገኘ (identifying correctly one’s role) for party members and state employees. This new initiative of the state is intended to combat religious partisanship in relation to state services. There have been accusations against various officials of the state that they conflated their religion with their office. In this initiative, state officials are required to show primary allegiance to the offices they assume and the constitutional provisions rather than their religious identity. Muslim activists felt that under the guise of this policy direction there was a lot of intimidation and mistrust towards Muslim employees.
and officials that openly display their Islamic identity through shortening their trousers, wearing hijab, growing beards, and other physical expressions of Islamic identities. To the activists, with the new policy direction in the name of secular principles, the state’s designation of Islamic identity marks invokes fear and intimidation.

In the anti-Islamic strategies outlined by the activists, the issues of Islamic NGOs also surfaced. In the opinion of the activists, the state was securitizing Islamic NGOs. To establish this, the activists indicate the closure of many Islamic NGOs and the impossibility of opening new ones. One of the contentions of Muslim activists is that the state treated favorably their Christians counterparts while being negatively disposed to Islamic charitable organizations. Adem (2012), one of the dissident committee representatives, remarks, “… even if we say that the money has come, in what way did it come? If we have received the money in the name of charitable organizations, we have none now. Before the new re-registration requirement, there were only six Islamic charities. There were around 4,000 Christian charities, and with the re-registration requirement, they were reduced into 2,500. If there is a charity of Saudi Arabia, would you mention its name?” The above remark was an attempt to refute the widely held claim that the Saudi charities inject a lot of finance to advance the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam via Islamic NGOs. An unnamed scholar (2010, p. 7) quoted in a periodic Islamic magazine asserts unequal treatment of Islamic NGOs: “The main problems are that our NGOs are looked at with suspicion by the state. Their NGOs acting freely make thousands of kāfir, but our NGOs are suspected of terrorism and they are looked at with an evil eye whenever they are asking for a license.”

8.7.3 Anti-Islamic “sect”

Opponents of Al-Ahbash generally recognize Sheikh Abdullah Muhammad Yusuf as the founder of Al-Ahbash. In addressing him, they add either Al-Harari and/or Al-Ahbash. Al-Harari and Al-Ahbash indicate his origin from the Harar region in Ethiopia. They note, however, that despite the founder’s origin in Ethiopia, his teaching does not represent Ethiopian Islam. They also point out that 90% of the adherents are Lebanese. The charitable association he led from 1983-2008, the Association of Islamic Philanthropic Projects (Jam'iyyat al-Mashari’ al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya), is mainly designated as a sect, not as an ordinary religion but a religiopolitical faction. Almost all of the critics of Al-Ahbash ignore the fact that the association’s formation preceded his ascendancy to its leadership in 1983 (Nejashi, 2011). 26

A few of those who recognize as a priority the formation of the association point out its radical reorganization since 1983 after Al-Ahbash acquired it. In the narrative, the process of acquisition was mischievous. The organization was snatched from its rightful owner. Much of the discrediting of

26The formation of the organization was in 1930.
Al-Ahbash emphasizes the association’s political nature. From the history of the association, a great deal is drawn from its involvement in Lebanon politics. Opponents pointed out that the organization had an association with the Syrian army for a long period; it had members elected in the Parliament of Lebanon, and its leader died in 1995 allegedly due to his political involvement. The association’s finances were scrutinized as circumstantial evidence. Critics asked rhetorically, “How could an association that has only a quarter million members solicit such a huge fund?” Reportedly, the publishing company had an annual budget of 3.2 billion dollars. Besides that, the organizations also have many other projects that require billions. In the narrative, thus, the support must be from externals that have a political interest. Purportedly, the two sources are Mossad and the Syrian intelligence agency.

In this narrative, the association with Mossad began in 1948, when Israel formed as a nation. It happened that the founder was in Israel at that very moment. In his stay there, from 1948 to 1950, everything was planned and a permanent link was created between the anti-Islamic nation of Israel and the founder. The claims provide little circumstantial evidence, one of which is the listing of the association as a member on the Anti-defamation League website. The discrediting does not end by pointing out that it supports an Israeli organization but also points out that the League members include rights groups that advocate homosexuality. By doing so, it paints negatively the moral stance of the association. In relation to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in 1982, the dissidents accuse the organization of issuing a fatwa not to fight against Israel on the ground that they are strong and powerful. More than that, the group had protection from Israel – while the neighboring Muslim residents and mosques were destroyed and many were killed, the Al-Ahbash center remained unaffected.

For dissidents, founder Sheikh Abdullah is the mastermind. Even though the organization is also on the radar of criticism, much more blame is placed upon him. All efforts were made to discredit his personality, his teachings, and his actions. With a sense of contempt, they point out that his followers continue to refer to him as their spiritual leader even though he passed away in 2008. With a sense of dismay, they also indicate that his followers call him Sayyiduna (our master) or Sheikhuna (our Sheik), in addition to hanging his photograph in their homes and keeping it in their mobile phones. The honorific way of addressing him also includes rahimahu'Allah (Allah have mercy upon him), a phrase associated with righteous Islamic personalities. More than anything, with lament they point out that his followers praise him as Tala' al-Badru ‘Alaynā, a title bestowed only upon prophet Muhammad. With a sense of detest, they also point out that he and his followers engage in self-praise and exaltation with references such as “the only scholar of Hadith” and “I have Auliya.” The apex of the exaltation is the fact that his followers take soil from his grave as a spiritual act. As a
result, they say, the communities he created are not worthy of Islam. The Al-Ahbash community permits men and women to mingle and dance.

Of all his inventions, the most outrageous one is his claim from the lineage of ash-Shaybiyy and Al-Abdariyy. The earlier is to claim lineage from the Banu Shaybah clan of Quraysh, who were in charge of Al-Kabah, and the latter to claim ancestry from Abdud-Dar, a clan of Qusayy Ibn Kilab, and the fourth grandfather of the prophet Muhammad. To discredit this claim, critics add that he also claimed to be a mufti of Somalia, a country he visited only once. Diaspora Somalis rejected his claim as fake as early as 1998.

In the depiction of the dissidents, Al-Ahbash scholars are no match intellectually even for a sincere believer, let alone for well-learned religious scholars, without the backing of the state. Thus, the sheikh thrived by associating with states and in contexts in which there were no strong religiously qualified `ulama that publicly criticized him. The success of the sheikh in Lebanon is due to the commitment of his disciples and the lack of well-learned `ulama that publicly oppose his teachings. In all the other places, however, he faced resistance. This explains why he left Ethiopia and could not stay in Saudi Arabia or Syria. In Ethiopia, for example, his teachings were largely not well received. During his stay in Saudi Arabia, no one endorsed his teachings. During his stay in Syria, he was also opposed by the learned. The other imagery used is that of the enemy, as in “Allah creates `ulama in every age that would stand before the enemies” (A. Ahmed, 2012).

The sheikh’s earlier days are also presented as obscure. In the narration, everything begins from his early days. It began long ago, and the present mirrors his past actions. As part of discrediting him, the scrutiny begins by analyzing his religious credentials and how he sided with the Christian Haile Selassie state while he was in Harar and opposed the Muslim communities. His opponents do not deny some of his connections with known personalities, Mufti Muhammad and Mufti Raya. They also do not fail to indicate that there is nothing substantial he has taken from any of them. After all, he stayed only for a short while (only two months with Mufti Muhammad Siraj al-Jabarti), was a source of division while he stayed, and finally was chased out due to fear that he was spreading so much division. During his stay at the school in Ethiopia, he never participated in Jumu'ah (corporate) prayers and was angry with his teacher to the extent of refusing to greet him as as-salamu alaykum, pointing out that he did not consider him a brother in Islam. His negative influence and the danger he posed was so evident that his teacher, Muhammad Siraj, reportedly said, “This person will create great trouble in the future.” He had also amulets around his neck for protection and to sell to the communities. His devotion was to ambiguous and doubtful items, and his actions were gira agabi (confusing) and awezagabi (divisive).

In the depictions, his betrayal of his own people started in Harar. The first victims were the Muslim communities and his father-in-law. His father-in-law, Sheikh Yusuf Abdurrahman, opened a
religious school that taught Dīn (religious teaching in accordance with the Quran and Hadith). To his dismay, Al-Harari joined with the anti-Muslim Haile Selassie state and became an instrument for the school’s closure. In doing so, he took part in spilling the blood of Muslims. He also implicated its teachers on the ground that they wrote an article in a foreign country criticizing the king, thereby causing their imprisonment and death. The emphasis is on how a Muslim could hand over an Islamic institution to an enemy. Handing over a Muslim to an enemy is considered the greatest of all crimes. The sheikh, however, was joyful upon the closure of the madrasah and the group. Due to his involvement, he was given the title of mufti. The people, however, called the season a Fitna tul kulub and his name became Sheikh of Fitnah (distress).

In explaining the season as distrustful and Al-Harari as the cause, however, the portrayal is very selective. It ignores or minimizes the fact that the Kulub or Hanolato was a political movement formed by Al-Harari in alliance against the central state. It also fails to note that the religious school was spreading anti-state propaganda both inside and outside Ethiopia (Wudu, 2012, p. 147). Before Al-Harari’s travel abroad, he was a student and a teacher. Both his students and his teachers note his confusing acts and afengatch (deviation). In Harar, he learned Tariqa Qadiriyyah from Sufism. Later he changed his brotherhood membership to Tariqa-Tijaniya, upon which he issued an edict of takfir (excommunication) against them. Tariqa is usually rejected as a philosophical approach, as it lacks a base in the Quran or Hadith literature and there is no historical support for it from the companions of the prophet. Generally, Harari’s formative periods are characterized as deviant, spiteful, and divisive. The critics contest that his acclaimed religious affiliations are not true. He did not follow Ash’ari, Rifa‘i in Tariqa, nor Shafi‘i in Fiqh. He was merely an imposter. To this end, various edicts made against him were assembled. An official Al-Azhar Fatwa on Ahbash was presented to discredit his Sufi claim and known personalities of the Sufi upon whom the sheikh issued a takfir edict.

The discussion of Al-Ahbash among the Muslim communities and on the Internet does not follow the same sources and logics. The offline face-to-face discussion among members of the Muslim community uses religious texts to justify the opposition. This does not mean, however, that the two are divorced. The offline discussions are uploaded on the net and the online discussions are printed or downloaded and copied into other offline mediums like CDs and paper. The difference is between the face-to-face discrediting and the writings designed for a larger audience. The offline messages have similarities to the online contexts when the medium becomes an offline newspaper and magazine, whether it is Islamic or not. The difference between the offline and online emerges only when the audience is Muslims.

In the offline discourse, the `ulama are the trusted custodians of God’s revelation. From the Quran the verse “Verily, I revealed the Dhikr and verily I will preserve it” (15:9) is taken as Allah’s promise to protect his word. From the Hadith also, it is thought that prophet Muhammad prophesied,
saying, “The ummah will split up into seventy-three, and all of them are in a fire except one.” As a result of God’s promise to protect and fulfill the prophecy of Muhammad, then, he always raised ‘ulama that would stand straight in his ordinances. This single group that Allah approved is the one that measures everything through the Quran and the Hadith. In the depiction of Al-Ahbash, the need for unity is given central importance. The Al-Ahbash is is a wolf that eats only those who stray off from the communities, as it is written, “Therefore, stick to the congregation, for the wolf eats the sheep that strays off on its own.” The sadaqa (charitable giving) program’s major theme, written on a big banner, was Surah 3, Al-i’Imran, Ayah 103, which says, “And hold fast, all together, unto the bond with God, and do not draw apart from one another.”27 The vulnerable targets are those who seek money, Siltan (power), smoke and chew ch’at. The implication is that those who seek only Allah and remain free of addiction do not follow the path of Al-Harari.

8.7.4 The hermeneutics of suspicion

In framing Al-Harari, as indicated above, there is a great deal of capitalization on the controversial status of the Al-Ahbash group in its establishment, development, and religious philosophy. Most of all, the framing employs a great deal of conspiracy theory, claiming that Al-Ahbash’s true nature is “a friend of our enemies.” The list of enemies includes the Shia Muslims, Israel, and the West.

The association’s relation of the Al-Ahbash with Syria follows two lines of reasoning. In the first line of reasoning, the founder of Al-Ahbash was linked with the so-called heretic sect known as Shia, Alawites, or Ansari. In this line of reasoning, Al-Harari was discredited from the Sunni interpretation of Islam. As a corollary to that, the critics also point out that although the group supported the Fourth Caliph Ali, they were critical towards the third Rashidun Caliph Uthman and towards Ibnu Taimiyah, a prominent 14th century Islamic scholar who fiercely criticized the Alawites. In the second line of reasoning, the Al-Ahbash relation with Syria is that of a pragmatic tactic, not of an ideological commitment. Allegedly, the motivation was a pecuniary interest. In the discrediting, the founder’s positive disposition towards the Alawites was to secure financial support from Syria’s intelligence agency through Bashar al-Assad.

The critics also allegedly claim that Al-Ahbash ended its historic relation with Syria and joined Mossad, the intelligence agency of Israel. The critics are aware that the interests of Syria and Israel are not congruent. In the effort to reconcile the association’s relation with divergent interest groups, they depict it as craftiness to mobilize resources. The overall effort is to discredit the association as a group that cannot forge any meaningful relationship with Islam but only with the enemies of Islam.

27 Ch’at (Catha edulis Forskal) is a mild narcotic plant commonly used among the Muslim communities for enhanced concentration and alertness. For detailed discussion of how it is used among the Ethiopian Muslim population, see Abbink (1992) and Carmichael (2000).
To the Muslim activists, either the relations forged with the Muslims are driven by political interest or by ignorance of the group’s nature, or they are transitory.

The linking of the group with Israel is also prominent. First, the dissidents argue that the group vehemently opposes anti-Israel groups as instigators. The question is, “Who does that?” A group that opposes anti-Israel groups, then, must be the creation of Israel itself, even if it is in disguise. Second, its position statement in relation to the Palestine freedom question is “only in a peaceful way.” The question is, “Who benefits from such an approach?” The conviction is that such a direction only benefits Israel, not Palestine. It also indicates a conviction that jihad is legitimate against Israel, which is the ultimate enemy of Islam. This perspective has been espoused for quite a long time in Ethiopian Islamic newspapers. Third, Professor Haggai Erlich (an Israeli) and the West depicted it positively as a moderate interpretation of Islam. The logic is that “true Islam” in principle cannot live in harmony with the West and Israel. One can clearly observe that radical hermeneutics of suspicion is the approach towards the evaluation of the Al-Ahbash.

The hermeneutics of suspicion were further strengthened through what critics usually call the three “shocking” positions, namely the group’s edict of heresy (takfir), its overly intimate friendship with the West, and its enmity and readiness to attack Wahhabi Muslims. Dissidents accuse Al-Ahbash adherents who label any disagreement with their religious philosophies, whose sources are unknown, as kāfir (unbelievers). The comment “whose sources are unknown” echoes a widespread conviction that its teaching does not derive from the two textual authorities, the Hadith and the Quran. Similarly, the use of religious philosophy also indicates the speculative nature of their teaching rather than its grounding on religious texts. For many also, showing intolerance towards Muslims but openness to forge an intimacy with the West is incoherent unless there are hidden motives. The Al-Ahbash are at best pretending; their true nature remains as the son of those who see Muslims as the enemy, whose criticism of Islam increased significantly after 9/11. The group position towards Wahhabi is interpreted as a disguised strategy to divide the Muslim communities and attack each of them. The real targets are, then, not Wahhabi, as the group claims, but “all Muslims.”

After putting forth Al-Ahbash’s nefarious intentions, activists note their willingness to abide by the secular constitution. They affirm that Ahbash has the right to operate in Ethiopia, since there is religious freedom guaranteed in the constitution. The opposition of Al-Ahbash, thus, is not that it holds a different opinion and religious philosophy than Muslims. The characterization is that Al-Ahbash is not Islam and thus has no business with the established mosques and religious centers. An activist on Islamic radio described the imposition of Al-Ahbash in this analogy: “It is like issuing a state decree that from now onwards what you could teach in EOTC is only the teaching of Catholicism” (Negashi, 2015).
There are four reasons advanced in defense of opposing the group. First, Al-Ahbash controls the EIASC by a monopoly. The fear is that the monopolization provides an opportunity for Al-Ahbash to spread its teaching, which is anti-Islamic. In a private newspaper interview, Yishak Eshetu remarks about the EIASC, “It is one thing not to benefit Islam. From an institution that claims to be Islamic, however, it is not expected to destroy Islam” (S. Solomon, 2012).

The joining of Al-Ahbash with the EIASC is a further degeneration in the nature of the organization. It is to turn from being useless to being dangerous and harboring anti-Islamic thoughts. The prevalent fear is that Al-Ahbash ideology will take root among EIASC leaders and, through the structure, it will enable the true teaching of Islam to be subverted by the heretic. An invitation to Al-Ahbash is equated with converting to another religion by abandoning what Ethiopian Muslims have been following so far. It is quite impressive to see the language of monopoly in the discourse. It seems that the issue is in contradistinction with the heretic designation and the edict that they are not Muslims. At a deeper level, there is a conviction that if there is an open venue for debate and discussion with well-learned scholars, the claims of the group are easy to refute. In this narrative, monopolization of the Islamic religious landscape by the Al-Ahbash provides a means to change the religion that the dissidents and Ethiopian Muslims have been following.

Second, from its history, there is a fear that it disseminates poisonous teachings that spread hatred and division among brothers. Here the reference is the fact that the group is indeed intolerant of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. It characterizes them as un-Islamic. Responding to the question of private media, the Al-Ahbash leader framed the Wahhabi as intolerant based on three grounds. To him, there are three reasons that clearly indicate the violent nature of it. These are its teachings evident in its books, its history, and the present developments throughout the world. To the Al-Ahbash leaders, Wahhabism is an ideology that needs to be refuted and discredited, and those who hold this view are not true Muslims.

Third, there is sufficient evidence that Al-Ahbash is a pretext by the US and the contrivance of an unjust worldwide campaign against Muslims. The conviction is the American state has chosen Al-Ahbash for Ethiopia as part of its international policy. The refutation of American policy is usually from two directions. The dissidents point out that there is no room for violence in Islam and the linking of Islam with terrorism is unfounded. The second line of argument is about America’s assessment of religious radicalism in Ethiopia. Beneath the discussion lie the WikiLeaks cables that imply that radicalism is gaining a strong footing among Ethiopian youth. The opponents refute the claim by asserting that radicalism and extremism do not have foundations in Ethiopia.

The opponents argue, for the sake of argument, that for battling terrorism, Al-Ahbash is not an adequate candidate. It fails the very objective intended to be achieved, since the organization itself is known for its terror. The argument is that we cannot battle terrorism by bringing in terrorists who
participated in the killing of the previous prime minister of Lebanon. The way forward to combat signs of radicalism in Ethiopia, lamentably, would have been the mobilization of its own Muslim communities and scholars, who know for sure that radicalism has no base in Islam. The Muslim communities could control those who have hidden agendas or pretexts.

The accusation of America as a prescriber of Al-Ahbash to the state seems an established fact. Thus, the decision of the Ethiopian state is not one of solitude. There is a great deal of pressure and influence from the US that claims that the GWOT and its source, Islamic radicals, are Wahhabi, whose influence also increased in Ethiopia. Al-Ahbash is thus one of the various strategies of the US, which are to strengthen those who are against it. In the policy direction two personalities stand out, the more prominent being Erlich and some also add Shinn. Erlich was chosen because he wrote positively about the group and he is a Jew. The pointing out of Shinn relates to his December 20, 2004, lecture at the American University of Beirut and WikiLeaks cables. The dissidents could see that a green light had been given to Al-Ahbash.

The involvement of America also relates to the cultural programming the embassy started to implement in Ethiopia. The American embassy’s yearly Ramadan id al-fitr (festival of the breaking of the fast) program is looked upon with suspicion. People ponder how the participants were selected and what their identity is. The support of the US state for the rehabilitation program of a well-known shrine, the Ye Dire Sheik Hussein mosque and shrine, is interpreted as a strategy for weakening Wahhabism and strengthening the Sufi, presumably because the two are enemies. Fourth, the group is radical in nature, and it endangers the religiously cooperative and tolerant culture of Ethiopia’s religious landscape. The religious tolerance between Christians and Muslims will be affected.

Under the topic of discrediting the others, I looked at the strategies the state, the EIASC, Al-Ahbash, and the dissidents use in discrediting the other. More specifically, I noted that the other is painted negatively, as an enemy, while one’s own role is exaggerated as the defender of Islam and constitutional provisions. The state, the EIASC, and the Al-Ahbash interpreters viewed the Wahhabi-inclined interpreters as the intolerant others that defy the religiously tolerant culture and the constitutional ethos. The dissidents framed the state as intentionally pursuing anti-Islamic policies and the Al-Ahbash anti-Islamic sect as supported by the West and Israel. The overall approach of the dissidents is that of the hermeneutics of suspicion, framing the Al-Ahbash as a friend of the enemies of Islam.
8.8 A Peaceful Means

In this section, I discuss the promotion of the peaceful means by which dissidents deal with Al-Ahbash interpreters. The demonization of the Al-Ahbash obviously poses a question among dissidents of how to deal with members of the Al-Ahbash group. The decision has been not to cut off social ties with them unless they wanted to. Such decisions are against the usual characterization of the Salafi-Wahhabi adherents. Many accuse them of passing the religious edict of kāfir for whoever does not agree with their religious opinions. The Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters accused the Al-Ahbash interpreters of being divisive, as they tend to pass an edict that the Salafi-Wahhabi advocates are out of Islam. The dissidents are thus careful in providing guidelines in order to protect themselves from the charge of intolerance.

The general guideline is that the Muslim communities should not go beyond debates both face-to-face and in writing, and any signs of violence should be avoided. Any offense from them is responded to only in the spirit of peace and sacrifice for the cause of Islam. A Facebook post summarizes the kind of determination required from the dissidents, የጠቻቹን ከቶ ላክም ከችላል በምን ያክል የጠቻቹን በኢባዳ ሉለየት ከው!

The relations of the dissidents, however, should be handled with much care. To provide a working guideline, it became popular among the dissidents to classify the so-called Al-Ahbash membership in four grades. The membership matrix consists of nationality, their willingness to associate with Muslims, and perceived reasons for associating with Al-Ahbash interpreters. Based on these three membership criteria, the Al-Ahbash interpreters fall into four different categories. The response for each grade also similarly varies.

The first category is that of international Al-Ahbash. Reportedly, there are not many of these in Ethiopia, and they teach in Al-Ahbash centers. The group has Markaz (centers) in three cities, Addis Ababa, Harar, and Dire Dewa. Reportedly, also those international Al-Ahbash scholars, even if they do not reside permanently in these religious centers, periodically visit to provide various training. The emphasis of their teaching is labeling and advocating disassociation with Wahhabi on the ground that they are unbelievers. The dissidents attack these groups vehemently.

Part of demonizing the international leaders is to associate the leaders with their fatwa. According to the dissidents, they have issued an edict of unbeliever against Dr. Zakir Nike. The invocation of Dr. Zakir is intentional. He is the most prominent apologist in Ethiopia, given that he appears on Islamic TV and there are translated materials of his books and DVDs. The invocation of his name is not without effect; it is a sign that these people are really against the causes of Islam and Muslims, since by opposing him, they stand against popular personalities that stand against the West.
and other religions. The response of the Muslim communities towards this group is to expose them and fight them legally, for the law of the land has permitted only peaceful preaching, not the teachings of hatred.

The second grading classifies some Al-Ahbash interpreters as Ethiopian radical Al-Ahbash. In the depiction, these groups are difficult to correct through debate; thus, the Muslim communities should not focus upon them. This group does not even pray in the same mosques unless they are alone. Some documents identify and label individuals who fall in this category. The third grading of Al-Ahbash is Ethiopian moderate Ahbash. The characterization of this group is more relational, rather than as a serious doctrinal conviction that creates divisions. In the depiction, the moderate Al-Ahbash continue their association with the Muslim communities and perform Salat (prayer) in the same mosque. The Muslim communities should do their best to exhort and turn them to the right ways.

The final group is called እናሆች ከብሆ ከብሆ (aggrieved Ahbash). In the characterization, the final group resent Muslims since the Muslim community treated them harshly. In their assessment, some preachers are responsible for their detachment from the Muslim communities. It is the lack of wisdom of the Muslim communities that caused such sentiment. Reportedly, some were spoken to harshly, scolded, and even at times accused of being mushrik (polytheist) since they mixed their unacceptable cultural practices with Islam. Being sensitive to the reproaches, they joined Al-Ahbash because it accommodates them.

8.9 Conclusion

At the center of the present controversy between the state and Muslim activists lies a preference towards a certain interpretation of Islam. The battle between the two interpretations of Islam is the indirect result of the recent policy direction of the state, the decision of the state to strengthen the institution of the EIASC as a contrivance to contain the perceived growth of radical Islam in Ethiopia. The decision of the state to support the EIASC led to the co-opting of Al-Ahbash leaders as partners against Wahhabism, which the state considered as a disestablishing force. The co-opting was based, among others, on its financial strength, its enmity to Wahhabism, and its founder being an Ethiopian Al-Ahbash. With the new alliance, a fear was resurrected among Wahhabi-oriented interpreters of Islam that their activities will be relegated into private and narrow circles and whatever has been gained will be reversed. In the process, the Diaspora Ethiopian Muslims took the lead in public demonstrations and in providing a solid intellectual base for the critique against the EIASC and Al-Ahbash. The dissenting group mainly used the Al-Ahbash conspiracy to maintain the mosques and religious schools as a competitive space. Part of the campaign is to frame the Al-Ahbash as an anti-Islamic force.
The EIASC and the state have espoused the religious radicalism narrative, while the Salafi-Wahhabi-oriented adherents of Islam have voiced religious interference from the state. In the depictions of Sufi-oriented Muslims and Salafi-Wahhabi-oriented Muslims, the politics of “othering” have framed the overall issues in term of representing Ethiopian Islam. Wahhabism for the Sufi and Al-Ahbash for Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters represent foreignness, inauthenticity, and intolerance. Besides othering, both have also used discrediting strategies.

The Al-Ahbash supporters have painted the Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters as intolerant others that disestablish the existing social cohesiveness and create division both within the Muslim communities and with the Christian neighborhood, having a radical and politicized Islamic agenda. In the depiction of the dissidents, the state is anti-Islamic and covertly pursues strategies that intimidate the Muslim communities not to participate as full-fledged citizens in Ethiopia. The Al-Ahbash characterization is as a religiopolitical faction that is an anti-Islamic sect and an intimate friend of the enemies of Islam. The overall means advocated for the end are peaceful.
Chapter Nine: Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes my research endeavor. The overall objective of the research was to examine the dynamic processes of collective memory formation and the politics of Muslim identity over the last 25 years (1991-2005) by both the ruling Ethiopian government and the Muslim Ethiopian. I examined developments in the state’s policy towards Islam in order to explore the present needs, interests, fears, and aspirations of the state and the dissident Muslims. In unpacking the policy directions, I attempted to document the state’s policy changes, factors that purported the changes, and the role and reaction of the Muslim communities. The overall attempt was to describe in an informative way how the past is matched as a narrative template that frames the present experiences of the dissident Muslims and the state over a period of 25 years (from 1991-2015).

The analysis of the causes attempted to look into the dynamics of local, regional, and global developments that made crucial imprints upon the state in shaping its attitude towards Islam. I also looked at developments within the Muslim community to understand both the role and reactions of Ethiopian Muslims in relation to the changing state policies. In the following section, I discuss briefly a summary of the research results, the conclusions, and their implications for further research and policy actions.

9.2 Summary of Results

In the introductory chapter (Chapter 1), I attempted to situate the research problem in context. To this end, I looked into the immediate contexts of the post-2012 public protests among the Muslim communities as background (1.1). In order to highlight also that the Ethiopian states always mobilized religion for their causes, I also looked into the Ethiopian states’ historical relations with the religious sector (1.2). I also situated the contentions of dissident Muslims within the post-1991 religious freedom discourse (1.3) to indicate that the Muslim communities have fared well under the current regime compared to the past. In indicating the research gap, I emphasized the marginalization of Islam in Ethiopian studies evident in the shortcomings of the studies both prior to the 1990s (1.4.1) and in the years after that (1.4.2). I wrapped up the first chapter by pointing out the various competing narratives, their inadequacies, and the research questions that guided the research (1.5). Finally, the chapter provided a roadmap that set expectations for each chapter to unfold (1.6).

The second chapter (Chapter 2) set forth theories and methods used in the research. Before delving into theories and methods, I explained how the term religious policy is used in this research (2.2). I also established the need to look into the informal institutions of developing countries as well as the parchment formal institutions in unlocking the policies of the state (2.3).
I also set forth superdiversity and collective memory. In relation to superdiversity, the emphasis has been the diversity of diversities and the interaction of the local with the global in shaping one’s identity (2.4). The collective memory section emphasizes the need to look into the present in order to understand the past, since memory is socially located (2.5). Related to collective memory, I looked into theories of social remembering, namely the presentist approach (2.6.1), the popular level approach (2.6.2), and the dynamic negotiation approach (2.6.3). In laying out the different theoretical approaches, I emphasized the need to be eclectic, using the presentist approach for inventions, the popular level approach to emphasize contest, and the dynamic memory approach to underline the negotiations. The final section also highlighted the impact of collective memory in forming identity and the role of activism (2.8).

The third chapter (Chapter 3) looked into Ethiopian nationhood and religious identity. In the introductory section (3.1), I made the contention that Ethiopia always harbored religious diversity from its antiquity and yet the dominant characterization has been that of a Christian nation. In order to appreciate the complexity of the notion and the contest that surrounds it, I attempted to conceptualize the notion of the Christian nation (3.2) and argued that the description is historically inaccurate in depicting the history before the rise of the 13th century “Solomonic kingdom.” In suggesting a criteria for the notion of a Christian nation (3.3), I emphasized that the notion can be contested even after the 13th century, given that there was religious diversity. I showed that contemporary Ethiopian Muslims are contesting the image of a Christian Ethiopia (3.4). I also indicated that the complex historical repository of the nation depicts a troubled but embellished past (3.5), in which one creates a religious sense of attachment to the past to advance one’s own present project. Given the proximity of the nation and its historical relations with the Middle East, I also indicated that there have been both alliances and suspicions between Ethiopia and the Middle East (particularly Saudi Arabia) (3.6).

Given that our understanding of Ethiopian Islam suffers greatly if we set aside the EOTC, I looked briefly into the history of Christianity in Ethiopia in the Aksumite period (3.7.1), the Zagwé dynasty (3.7.2), and the Solomonic dynasty (3.7.3). In a similar way, I looked into the history of Islam in Ethiopia. Particularly, the formative periods of Islam (3.8.1), its expansion (3.8.2), and its diversification and indigenization were the concerns (3.8.3). The symbiotic nature of the Christian kingdom with the EOTC made it necessary to look into the relationship between the Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates. The overall argument was that the economic and political aspects of the conflict outweigh the religious motivation. To establish this thesis, I looked into the skirmishes on the trading routes (3.9.1), the weakening of the Christian dynasty and the strengthening of Islamic sultanates (3.9.2), and the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty and the war against the Muslim sultanates (3.9.3). In reviewing the socialist Derg’s religious policy, I observed
that the approach of the state was to perceive religion as undesirable historical heritage (3.10). The legend and the quest for Prester John were also reviewed to show how the Western imagination of Ethiopia was shaped by it (3.11). The overall conclusion of the chapter discussed the marginalization of Islam from Ethiopian politics (3.12).

The fourth chapter (Chapter 4) aimed to identify the Ethiopian Muslim activists’ memories and their utility. In light of this objective, I looked into the overarching narrative, which is the narrative of religious marginalization (4.2). I also looked at the narrative logic of the religious marginalization narrative (4.3). I argued that for the activists, the marginalization of Islam in both Ethiopian politics and Ethiopian history is the result of three intertwined elements, namely the monopoly of non-Muslim historians that biased the historical accounts (4.3.1), the dominance of the Christian perspective (4.3.2), and the heavy reliance on Christian sources for historical reconstructions (4.3.3). I also highlighted that the counternarratives of the Muslim activists were polemical in nature and found to be unacceptable to the Christians (4.4). I showed that provoking sympathy (4.5) and charging the Muslim communities with positive energy (4.6) were the goals of the collective memories advanced by the Muslim activists. I also demonstrated that in order to provoke sympathy, the Muslim activists invoked Haile Selassie as “the king of darkness” who pursued the strategies alleged to have been cunningly employed to marginalize the Muslim communities from national life. In doing so, I indicated that the concerns of the present forced the activists to overlook historical nuances. In relation to motivating the Muslim communities, I highlighted the fact that Ethiopia is depicted as the second nation in the world that received Quranic Islam (4.6.1) and as a nation that contributed to great personalities in Islam (4.6.2) as well as heroic figures (4.6.3).

The fifth chapter (Chapter 5) aimed at laying out the EPRDF’s depiction of Ethiopia’s religious history with the intent of identifying inventions, contests, and negotiations (5.1). To this end, I discussed the formation of the EPRDF and the senior-junior relationship that governed the political coalition (5.2). I also emphasized that ethnicity is the overarching narrative under which other collective identities and individual rights are subsumed (5.3). In this line, I emphasized that the EPRDF views the past as an age of darkness distinct from both the present and the future (5.3.1). In the depiction, prominent positions are given to the ethnic marginalization of diverse ethnicities in Ethiopia and the economic narrative, even though the latter is relatively recent and progressively becoming more dominant (5.3.2). I also noted that the discrediting of the past states hinged on the claim that they did not recognize the value of unity in diversity while promoting the Amharic language at the center and Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Christianity as the unifying element of modern state-building (which some consider as imperialism) (5.3.3).

In unlocking the EPRDF’s depiction of Ethiopia’s religious history, which it attempts to bring under the ethnic marginalization narrative, we observed that, similar to the ethnic marginalization
narrative, it also espoused the theme of religious marginalization (5.4.1). We also observed that there are inventions, contests, and negotiations in the narratives of both the Ethiopian Muslim activists and the state. Given that the EPRDF’s narratives employ a lot of constitutional rhetoric, we looked into its 1995 constitution and the previous constitutions that the EPRDF dismisses as ill-informed (5.4.2). I also looked into the ambivalence of the EPRDF in labeling the religious beneficiaries of the states it negatively paints. I depicted that, with the hope of curtailing opposition and promoting religious peace, the narratives of the EPRDF made all religious establishments victims of the state, albeit by varying degrees and means. In this regard, I noted that Muslim activists resisted the EPRDF. The activists similarly invented the narrative that it was the EOTC that instilled a negative sentiment in the Christian kings towards Islam and used the state apparatus for marginalizing Muslims from Ethiopian national life (5.4.4)

The following two chapters (Chapter 6 and Chapter 7) presented the contemporary state’s policy towards Islam from 1991 to 2015. In laying out the EPRDF’s policy towards Islam, the analysis indicated that much weight was placed on local developments. This is not to say the state policy was detached from regional and global developments. The truth is far from that. As these two chapters (Chapter 6 and Chapter 7) attempted to show, regional and local development had roles, but their impact in shaping the state’s policy towards its own Muslim population has always been secondary in importance. In relation to external policy, the state effectively employed to its advantage the concern of the international community to earn favor and legitimacy from the United States and the West, whose interest in the Horn of Africa continues to rise, as the region remains a hot spot. The relative degrees of influence have also changed during the 25 years.

In the sixth chapter (Chapter 6), I looked specifically into the pre-1991 period of EPRDF policy, which I identified as actively co-opting the Muslim community as part of its effort to consolidate its power. I also showed that increased consciousness of ethnic identity results in conflicts that are difficult to classify as religious or ethnic given that the two are conflated (6.2.1). I looked at the question of Sharia courts in relation to constitutional provisions, as an expression of the Muslim communities’ desire for religious identity to play a much more significant role in their public life rather than being limited to family matters (6.2.3). In understanding the initial periods, I noted the role of the pre-1991 TPLF’s view (6.2.4) and the transitional state (6.2.5) as formative. In both cases, I argued that religion had secondary importance for the EPRDF and was viewed mainly as effective propaganda machinery, with the perception that its influence wanes as the society develops and the impact of scientific education increases. I also noted that the EPRDF’s religious freedom permitted the Muslim community to connect with their global coreligionists. In relation to the new connections, I noted that the trans-local character of Islam in Ethiopia increased significantly (6.2.6).
I also noted that there was a temporary watershed between the state and the Muslim communities. The watershed followed the internal power struggle that eventually led to the monopolization of the religious landscape of the Muslim community by the EIASC, as an official representative of the Muslim communities in Ethiopia. The overall analysis of the period is that the overall policy of the state was characterized by a friendly stance towards the Muslim communities in Ethiopia. In the initial periods, the EPRDF’s attitude related to its own religious marginalization narrative, and thus it co-opted Muslims. As I noted in the research, the pre-1995 period was basically characterized as friendly. It was a period in which the EPRDF actively courted support from the Muslim communities. In this period, the EPRDF successfully branded itself to the Muslim communities as a liberator, a party that brought to an end the political marginalization of its Muslim population. The new freedom of religion and equality gains were not unique to Islam but also enjoyed equally by evangelical Christians. The trans-local character of Islam also increased in the nation through an increased opportunity to travel abroad (6.2.7).

In the mid-1990s, its relations with the neighboring countries led to a renewed focus on Islamic radicalism as a long-term threat (6.3.1). The overall argument of the chapter is that regional factors had more weight than global ones in the second half of the 1990s. The state policy towards Islam did not change much throughout 1995-2001. What made the period remarkably different was that Islamic fundamentalism was considered a threat, but mainly from the two neighboring countries, Sudan (6.3.2) and Somalia (6.3.3). The period also exhibited increased connections with coreligionists outside Ethiopia, especially with Muslims in Saudi Arabia. During the period, the public visibility of Islam in Ethiopia increased, and these new relations not only financed the construction of Islamic institutions but also played a role in disseminating the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. In this period, the Islamic finance from Saudi Arabia was private in nature, based on the personal networks of individuals rather than under the EIASC. In fact, the EIASC also strengthened its contact with Saudi Arabia, as it is evident that the grand mufti of Mecca and the governor visited Addis Ababa. In relation to that, even if there were some conflicts between the reform-oriented new teaching of Islam and the traditional Muslims of Ethiopia, the intra-religious relationship in general could be characterized as cordial.

The seventh chapter (Chapter 7) covered the state’s policy towards Islam from 2001 to 2015. In the first sub-section (7.1), I argued that the policy of the state (2001 to 2005) was one of cleansing the EIASC’s leadership from the influence of Wahhabism, which the state classified as an intolerant and foreign interpretation of Islam. In the second sub-section (7.2), I argued that the state approach towards Islam between 2005 and 2008 remained one of interfaith dialogue. Its objective was to counter the mounting religious radicalism via the mobilization of formal religious institutional leaders. The state also attempted to control religious activism. In the third section (7.3), I argued that
the state started to play roles that are more assertive and attempted to domesticate Islam as a preemptive measure to reduce intra-religious conflicts.

The 2001-2005 period marked another change in EPRDF policy towards Islam. The EPRDF’s support of the leadership candidates for the EIASC extended to the rejection of the Salafi/Wahhabi interpretation of Islam (7.1.2). Such a policy direction derived from the combinations of global, regional, and local developments in relation to Islamic fundamentalism. The new alliance with the US, which views Wahhabism negatively both as an exporter of radical ideology and a disestablishing force for social cohesion informed the EPRDF’s perspective towards Islam (7.1.3).

The EPRDF’s categorization of Wahhabism was also shaped by internal events, for the period witnessed both intra-religious and interreligious clashes that shaped the state’s attitude towards Islam. The religious polemics between EOTC adherents and Muslims also reached their peak in this period (7.1.4). In light of regional developments and the interest of the US in the region, the Ethiopian government clearly framed the problem facing the nation as an Islamic radicalism threat from the neighboring countries and openly showed allegiance to the West and the US (7.1.5). The overall result was an effort to securitize the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and to cleanse any form of it from EIASC members. This in no way implies that the EPRDF viewed the Muslim community as a security threat. As the pre-2005 election Muslim activism showed, the Muslim communities’ allegiance was primarily to the EPRDF rather than to its opponents (7.1.6).

Despite the fact that during this period the Sufi-dominated EIASC monopolized the official representation of Ethiopian Muslims, mosques remained competitive spaces for various interpretations of Islam between 2006 and 2008. The Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation’s impact greatly increased as young Salafi-Wahhabi increasingly became imams of the newly built mosques as well as older mosques, replacing the older Sufi-oriented imams (7.2.2). The state’s allegiance to the EIASC continued despite the Diaspora delegates’ diplomatic attempt to discredit the EIASC leadership with legitimacy deficits, charging it with corruption, professional incompetence, and administrative backwardness (7.2.3). The period also exhibited many more interreligious clashes than the first half of the 2000s, especially in the southwestern Oromia region where Islam is dominant (7.2.4). The approach of the state during this period was the mobilization of interfaith joint commissions to prevent the attacks from spreading throughout the country. In collaboration with federal and newly installed local government officials, they took the initiative to formulate frameworks for healthy dialogue aimed at reconciliation.

As a corollary to the state’s effort, the US embassy also launched cultural programming to serve as a buffer against the perceived radical Wahhabist interpretation (7.2.5). Following the 2005 election, the EPRDF also rendered inept the opposition parties that joined the Parliament. The Parliament also issued various proclamations aimed at quelling future dissent. In particular, the 2008
press law, the draft of the 2009 anti-terrorism proclamation, and the 2008 proclamation governing charities had the effect of reducing the role of religion in public spaces and encouraging self-censorship out of fear of harassment. These proclamations served as the means to close Islamic NGOs, charge and close Islamic presses, and detain dissident Muslim representative committee members (7.2.6).

The year 2009 marked the beginning of pre-emptive measures and the framing of religious conflicts as security issues (7.3.1). The state took seriously the threat of Islamic extremism. The joint provision of training and the EPRDF’s intention to domesticate Ethiopian Islam through the promotion of the Al-Ahbash sect, however, produced negative effects. Tighter control, when translated into practice, means a conscious effort to repress some interpretations of Islam in favor of others. Rather than reducing radical mobilization, the efforts evoked resistance and a sense of solidarity, which undercut the intended effects. The failure of an inclusive approach of the state in relation to various interpretations of Islam resulted in a persistent and organized voice of dissent that lasted for nearly 4 years. The more assertive role of the state in joining hand in hand with the EIASC and the Al-Ahbash interpreters of Islam caused a public protest (7.3.2). Unlike the previous periods, the state also used its media to discredit the movement as radicals with the intent of establishing an Islamic state (7.3.3 to 7.3.8). Similarly, the Muslim activists used both social media networks and the available print media to discredit the state, employing human rights language and constitutional provisions (7.3.9).

The overall intent of the eighth chapter (Chapter 8) is different from the previous two (Chapter 6 and Chapter 7). The purpose was to describe the rhetoric of sensibility used. To this end, I noted that constitutional provisions were at the center of the rhetoric of the state, the EIASC, and the dissidents (8.2). I argued that despite the rhetoric of sensibility, the stakes at hand were the fact that mosques would no longer be competitive spaces for the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and the fear that the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam would dominate Ethiopian Islam via the role of the EIASC and the state’s sponsorship (8.3). The overall framing of the issue, however, remained the interference of the state (8.4.1) and religious radicalism (8.4.2).

The rhetoric of sensibility more than anything used the politics of othering in an attempt to discredit the perceived opponent. In this new politics, Ethiopian Islam was extolled a lot and foreign elements were greatly discredited. The strategy capitalized on a culture that looks suspiciously upon anything linked to foreigners. What constituted the debate of Ethiopian Islam and foreign Islam, however, remains controversial. For the EIASC and the state, the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam represents the culturally tolerant Ethiopianness, while Wahhabism, in contrast, represents intolerance and foreignness. In the eyes of the dissidents, Ethiopian Islam constituted the ways of the Salafi,
while the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam is a foreign import. The Al-Ahbash interpreters were also accused of political motives (8.5).

In the process of Othering, the EIASC, the state, and the Al-Ahbash-inclined interpreters emphasized the intolerant nature of Wahhabism and its covert political agenda. The framing of Wahhabism is that of intolerant, divisive, insincere, and financially motivated. In their depiction of the state, the dissidents painted it as anti-Islamic. The state turned from an object the Muslims supported into a party that covertly designed anti-Islamic sentiments to marginalize the Muslim community from political and national life. The Al-Ahbash interpretation, for the dissidents, is as a non-Islamic sect (8.6.3) and an intimate friend of the enemy of Islam (8.6.4). In the effort to paint themselves positively, the dissidents also put great emphasis on the peaceful means they are employing and the craftiness of the other (8.7).

9.3 Discussion of Results

A scrutiny of the secularism principles espoused in the 1995 constitution provides an impression that the state has an unwavering attitude towards the promotion of freedom of religions and equality, the ideals of any modern democratic states. Indeed, the constitutional provisions abolished the religious persecution of the Derg and the monarchical states that established the EOTC as the national church. This was the consensus both from local and foreign observers before the post-2011 developments. Given that the political culture of the nation operates more via informal institutions, however, one should not hasten to conclude that the practices of the state were congruent to nurturing religious freedom and equality as democratic ideals.

In order to understand both the motivations of the constitutional provisions and the practices of the state, it is necessary to look beyond the parchment institutions. In this regard, informal institutions play a decisive role in EPRDF politics. In unlocking the informal institutions, operating in stealth and yet instrumental, I also looked into the political nature of the EPRDF. The historical circumstances that brought the EPRDF into existence gave TPLF, the ethnic minority Tigrayan party, an upper hand over the other three ethnic-based parties and the remaining allies from minority population regions. The senior-junior relationship thus led TPLF views to continue having an upper hand in policy directions. The senior-junior relationship brought forward TPLF’s perception of religion into the EPRDF. In order to understand the EPRDF’s religious-related provisions, I thus argued that looking into the pre-1991 stance was indispensable, as well as examining the EPRDF’s transitional periods.

Throughout the research, I argued that the EPRDF’s actions are ideologically driven. In the analysis of the pre-1991 stance, I noted that TPLF’s governing political ideology was Marxist. Consistent with its commitment to Marxism, despite the fact that its founders were from an EOTC
background, TPLF held a negative view about religions and the religious. Unlike its predecessor the Derg, the state did not attack religious establishments but rather creatively and actively mobilized the religious for its own ethno-linguistic political programs. In the process, TPLF ensured that ethnic identity remained the primary identification mark and that religious identity remained secondary in importance, one of the many diverse manifestations of ethnic diversity. There is no evidence that TPLF in its formative period viewed religion as a potential public good or national resource that the state in some circumstances should assist. The failed hope has been that as economic development and scientific education advance, the role of religion in Ethiopian society would dwindle. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that the religious landscape of the nation has become more competitive and is increasingly characterized by religious fundamentalism.

The EPRDF narratives espousing ethnic marginalization and its economic narrative were also easily conflated with the religious marginalization narrative, given that some ethnicities are predominantly Muslims. In this regard, the role of Muslim activists in appropriating the ethnic narratives as the religious marginalization of Islam is profound. As the EPRDF invented religious ideals as one of the causes of its guerilla fighting, Muslim activists invented the religious motive as the primary motivation of the Christian kingdoms. In doing so, the activists rejected the state’s proposition that the primary motivation of the religious marginalization in historic Ethiopia was economic and political. The Muslim activists also rejected the proposition that the Muslim sultanates of Ethiopia were equally economically motivated and their actions towards the Christians were also forms of religious marginalization.

To the Muslim activists, the Muslim sultanates were benevolent to the Christian communities and their destructive actions were reactions against the prevailing political and economic dominance of the Christian kings. Like in the state’s narrative, the Muslim activists agreed that the history of the people is different from the history of the rulers, the earlier as accommodating and the latter as repressive to the Muslim communities in Ethiopia. But the activists reject the state’s narrative that creatively counts the EOTC as a victim of religious freedom, whereby the Christian kings imposed their will upon the church. Muslim activists, contrary to the state, harbor the sentiment that the church used the monarchs in marginalizing Ethiopian Muslims from political and national life.

In the narrative of the Muslim activists, the marginalization of the Muslim communities is evident both in history and in historical depictions. The marginalization has to do with the fact that both the rulers and the historians were Christians. It is the ruler’s detestation of Ethiopian Muslims that led to their exclusion from the political space, and the EOTC played a significant role in the process. In the Muslim activists’ assessment, the prevailing mainstream depictions exhibit the same kinds of bias. To them, the mainstream historical corpus merely reflects the opinions of Christian historians writing history from a Christian perspective employing only the Christian sources.
The Muslim activists not only criticized the available history in mainstream historical narratives. They also attempted to reconstruct an alternate depiction of the past to invoke sympathy from the other communities and serve as a source of positive vitalizing energy to claim more space in Ethiopian politics and nationhood. The newly constructed depiction, however, clashed with both the historical narratives and the Christian narratives. The fact that the Muslim activists primarily relied on religious traditions and Arabic sources and trivialized local Christian sources created a perception that the revision of history was one of modern jihad. More so, due to the fact that the new narratives of the Muslim activists paint the past predominantly as conflictual, minimizing the peaceful coexistence, the new narratives are viewed with suspicion.

In the EPRDF’s perception, the importance of marshaling support from the religious derives from the realization that Ethiopians are religious and the religious leaders command power over their adherents. The implication of this perception has been that a religion that asserts a public role and mobilizes its people in society beyond the promotion of religious values is considered as a threat rather than a strength that enriches society. The underlying approach towards institutionalized religions has been that of fear that they might command powers that systematically undermine revolutionary democratic ideals and ethno-linguistic politics. In the initial years, such a threat was mainly from the established the EOTC, the church that views itself as the guardian of Ethiopian history. The result has been the decentering of the church and its influence by interfering in its leadership. The approach of the state towards the evangelicals and Muslims was to actively court their support. The state’s success in its approach was no more evident than in the 2005 competitive election. Most of the Muslim activists sided with the EPRDF, promoting the party out of fear that the opposition parties’ narratives centered on the EOTC, and thereby not only would the Muslim communities be marginalized, but also the gains achieved could be reversed.

In contradistinction to its predecessor, the Marxist Derg, the overall approach of the EPRDF towards religion has been that of pragmatism rather than an inherent commitment to the democratic ideals of religious freedoms and equality. The formative periods of TPLF and the EPRDF had a naïve perception that religion would wane away from the centrality of Ethiopian nationhood and politics as its economy and scientific-based education expand. Unlike its expectation, however, the religiosity of the people did not dwindle but was rather revitalized. In terms of affecting the society, religions continued to provide hope and meaning. This has been no less true for EPRDF appointees who assumed various administrative posts. The political apparatus fell prey to this expectation, and right from the inception these officials became the object of criticism, accused of siding with their own coreligionists and advancing their interests through a partisan approach.

There are also shreds of evidence indicating that formal religious representations at the national level, preferably organized in line with ethnic federalism, represent the interests of the regime to
exercise control and advance its own revolutionary democracy. In this line, thus, I also argued that the approach of the state towards religions has not fundamentally changed over time, but the method it employs to achieve its objective has varied. In the EPRDF’s perspective, religions always remained powerful institutions whose power the state should tame in line with the political program. One of the ways in which this could succeed is limiting the legitimate sphere within which religion could participate. In this regard, the role of the constitution is profound. Via its claim of the plurality of religion, its institutions espoused secularist ideals.

The secularism ideas as the EPRDF espouse them rule out the possibility that religion could play an assertive role in education and politics. The argument of the state has been that the recognition of religious plurality requires the strict separation of the state and religion. The secularism principles espoused in the constitution, however, show some sort of ambivalence. The constitution, for example, legalizes the operation of the Sharia courts to the extent that the parties consent and the issue relates to a family matter. The same constitution also rules out the possibility for religion to be a means of mobilizing or forming public opinion on matters other than religion. The religious sector thus cannot teach religion in public schools unless the whole purpose of the school is religious. The religious also cannot form political parties based on religion. The ambivalence of the EPRDF makes sense when one considers that its nature has been one of pragmatism in certain matters and holding rigid positions when its political program is threatened. The exclusion of religion from public life has been its stance from the very beginning.

In looking at EPRDF pragmatism, I also took notice of developments within religion. A pragmatic evaluation of its own performance, via the appointed officials, in the delicate relationship with religion brought to its attention the reality of religious partisanship. The overlapping of the majority of the adherents’ ethnic identities with that of the local officials, however, made it difficult to discern the sense of inconvenience and marginalization of the religious minority. More than anything, the actions of the EPRDF towards religious or any other institutions hinge on an intention to hold on to power at all costs, and so the state ignored the marginalization of religious minorities as long as its political program was being advanced. Thus, the EPRDF’s attention towards the religious sector has consisted of backing and co-opting the existing leadership of Islam and Christianity as allies. It cared very little about local reform-oriented developments among the Muslim communities. The state’s perception of religiosity in the public arena generally is negative, but given the religiosity of the society, the overall approach has been one of pragmatism.

In the research, I contended that the EPRDF’s policy towards Islam is not unique from other religions, unlike the contentions of many Muslim activists. The EPRDF’s policy towards Islam was consistent with the EPRDF’s perception of religion. The policy, however, was never static but rather changed in response to local, regional, and international factors. In the pre-2001 events and a few
years after that, state attention towards intra-religious violence consisted of passivity and controlling public activism. The EPRDF’s interest in the religious sector was mainly characterized as ensuring that organized religious institutions sided with its political programs. The post-2001 alliance of the state in the GWOT, which bolstered its relationship with the US, brought a shift in its understanding of reform movements in Islam, more specifically Wahhabism. There is evidence indicating that the state uncritically inherited from the US the perception that the Wahhabi form of interpretation of Islam is inherently a cause of discord and instability. In the pre-2009 period, however, a negative attitude towards Wahhabism translated only into containing its influence via the promotion of the EIASC, which has an anti-Wahhabist stance. The EPRDF leadership did not notice or give attention to the fact that this reform movement of Islam could grab the attention of the youth beyond the influence of the formally instituted leadership of the EIASC.

There are also shreds of evidence that the influence of a fundamentalist-oriented interpretation of Islam gained a stronger footing, especially after 2001. Progressively, thus, the pejorative connotation of Wahhabism in the 1990s and the early 2000s gave way to a positive interpretation among the youth. Notwithstanding the failure of this movement to grab the attention of the elderly strata of Muslim communities, its main proponent secured an image that construes them as true guardians of the religion. Part of the transformation from foes to heroes derived from a successful appropriation of the past into the present and an increased level of accommodation towards divisions within Islam. The state’s narratives of ethnic marginalization were also easy to translate into religious marginalization, especially in those areas where ethnic identity and religious identity are not separate identities as such. The revision of Ethiopian history, such as the depiction of Ahmed Gragn, became both a religious and ethnic issue.

A return to the Quran and the Hadith has also brought a contest with adherents of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as to whether there was a Muslim king or not in the historic Abyssinia. The resistance of such interpretations by Christians is partly translated as a continued exclusion of the Muslim communities from Ethiopian life. Increasingly, thus, the contest arena has turned its focus from inward to outward. The historical and theological controversies further manifested themselves into the claim of public spaces. From mid-2000 onwards, there were various conflicts related to the claim of public spaces, especially in cases of publicly performed religious rituals. Construction of mosques and churches and allotment of land to cemeteries were also other contentious issues. In rural areas, also the lives of many Christians were lost.

The year 2005 also kindled a hope for free democratic election. Because the stronger opponents of the EPRDF were recently organized parties that did not have the necessary financial means to mobilize the society, strategically they resorted to a non-organized party affiliated with strong traditional institutions. Thus, the religious organizations became their focus, especially the EOTC.
and evangelical Christians. The state in its post-2005 period accused some evangelical institutions of providing information to various foreign rights-based organizations. Many evangelical Christians also participated as private candidates representing opposition parties. The opposition parties also succeeded in mobilizing students from various educational institutions. The success of opposition parties with the Muslim population was relatively low, given that the opponents were critics of an ethnic-based federalism that was easily conflated with religious identities in some ethnicities. The rhetoric of a unitary form of unity also created the fear of a return to the old days that centered on Amhara and their religion. There were also reports among the popular preachers that some of the proponents of the opposition parties exhibited negative attitudes towards Islam. Many Muslims regretfully state that if it was not for the support of the Muslim communities the EPRDF would have been unable to enjoy its contentious electoral victory. Both EIASC leadership and popular preachers embarked on discrediting opposition parties and marshaling support for the EPRDF.

The post-2005 election periods were thus years of narrowing down of the political space. In the attempt to curtail spaces of religious organizations, media, and educational institutions, the state issued restrictive proclamations and directives. Intra-religious conflicts also increased, especially in regions of Oromia, where Muslims are the majority. The proclamations issued and the directive of the Ministry of Education (MoE) followed a new course with fundamentalist-oriented Muslims. Then progressively the discourse of marginalization within the present state took another detour. The issuance of the census results in 2007 also brought a debate about the Ethiopian Muslims’ percentage. The 2007 census and the issuance of the constraining proclamations brought the issue of the marginalization of Muslims to the forefront. Despite the increasing intra-religious tensions among the religious communities, the state distanced itself and promoted interreligious forums as a reconciliatory mechanism. It was only after 2009 that the state started to take matters in its own hands, and from the year 2011 onwards the systematic marginalization of Islam rose to the forefront.

I looked into the claim of the dissidents that the state was informally pursuing policies that systematically marginalize Ethiopian Muslims. Notwithstanding the reality of informal institutions within Ethiopian state politics, much of the claims do not have a strong empirical basis. The only informal institution that is at work is that no organized movement should challenge a religious institution that has a national level of representation, and the leaders of this institution should cooperate with the state and ensure that the narrative of marginalization always has the nations and nationalities at the center. Any voice of dissent against the state-supported nationally representing institutions and any movement that seeks to maintain independence is looked on as suspicious and framed as a disguised political movement.

I also documented that the utility of the past narratives is important. Both the EPRDF and other memory entrepreneurs within the Muslim communities have creatively devised narratives. For the
EPRDF, the political history of the nation is different from the social history, and the characteristic of the former is ethnic marginalization while the latter is tolerance. The ethnic marginalization narrative of the EPRDF also grants the religious marginalization of Islam as long as it is subsumed as a subsidiary identity within the broader ethnic identity. The narratives of Muslim activists, however, assert the religious marginalization of Islam as a distinct category separate from ethnic marginalization, even though they successfully employ the latter to assert the former, given that the two conflate in some ethnicities. In the discourses of the present, there are also both commonalities and divergences between the narrative of the state and of Muslim activists. The consensus is that the present constitution sets out a legal framework that ensures the rights of Muslims, even though there are differences in the interpretation of secularism as set in the constitution and the controversial MoE regulations. The image of the great enemy invented in the Muslims’ marginalization narrative has changed significantly over the last 25 years.

In the initial years, the greater enemy of Ethiopian Islam was the EOTC. Such a perception is the product of the historic symbiotic relationship of the imperial states and the church. The rejection of King al-Najāshī’s conversion as recorded in the Hadith, the historical depiction of Ahmed Gragn as an archenemy of Christianity, and the definition of the nation as primarily Christian were part of the contention. From the church, Mehabire Kidusan was the primary culprit in perpetuating the contentions as lasting ideas. Over time, the greater enemy turned from the EOTC to fundamentalist evangelical believers. More specifically, officials with an evangelical background are accused of using their political power to proselytize the Muslim population. More recently, however, the image of the great enemy creatively combined evangelical public officials, the EPRDF, and members of the EIASC that promote the Al-Ahbash ideology.

The marginalization narrative of the past also follows the suggestion. The overall venture is to establish a sense of independence in the present political discourse and to provoke sympathy from the world community. The narrative’s instrumentality is also to charge the Muslim communities with positive energy and furnish the resilience to sustain the community in the Christian-dominated culture of Ethiopia. The narratives of the EPRDF’s totalitarian nature are in line with the presentist tradition of collective memory, where the state as power holder attempts to instill its own official memory of ethnic marginalization, from which all the other narratives derive. The reality that there are strong religious traditions, such as the EOTC church, that cherish the past as their heritage prevented the past from forming easily into the image the EPRDF purported. Thus, there are competing narratives that counter the dominant narrative of the EPRDF. The popular counternarratives of religious institutions, however, are not marginal as the popular memory approach suggests, since religious institutions hold a strong influence upon the society. Also, the
trust vested in secular education and its content lags behind the authority that traditional religious institutions command.

Close observations indicate that there is a lot of negotiation taking place in the way the past is interpreted, as the dynamic negotiation memory approach suggests. The interpretation of the past exhibited a different level of compliance with the state narrative depending on the present needs and the power the memory entrepreneurs command in the negotiation process. This is more evident when one looks at the fact that the image of the greatest enemy has changed. In a similar manner, the willingness or rejection of religious marginalization to be subsumed under the political history of Ethiopia varied among different parties. EOTC adherents generally do not reject proposals that distinguish the religious history from political history. For some Muslim activists, however, acceptance of the distinction entails neglecting measures that should redress the historic marginality.

The increased competition from religious identities against ethnic identities required tighter control and regulation of the religious sector. Tighter control, when translated into practice, meant a conscious effort of repressing some interpretations of Islam in favor of others. Thus, the state’s stance has become exclusionary to certain interpretations of Islam. More specifically, the regime considered Wahhabism as a negative force that undermines the religious tolerance culture of the nation. In contrast, it promoted and protected any form of indigenous Islam that emphasizes and maintains the already existing religious tolerance. In line with this, the state positively viewed and supported the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam because it staunchly opposes the Salafi or Wahhabist form of interpretations of Islam. The effort has not, however, been very fruitful. Rather than reducing radical mobilization, it evoked resistance and a sense of solidarity that undercuts the intended effects. The exclusionary stance towards certain forms of Islamic interpretation and the extolling of some forms of Islam feed the perception that the state interferes in the affairs of Islam. Its failure to recognize the peaceful nature of the protest movement also worked against its own credibility.

As I attempted to show, the EPRDF’s policy towards Islam responded to local, regional, and global changes. At the expense of simplicity, however, the impact of local factors outweighs regional and global factors in the perception of the state. This is not to undermine the role of regional and global developments in relation to Islam. After 9/11, the alliance of the EPRDF with the US in the Global War on Terrorism affected its understanding of the reform movement of Wahhabism as a disestablishing force.

Following the essentialist perspective, the definition of Wahhabism as a disestablishing foreign religious element has remained static. The state policy ignored the local dynamics, the normalization of the interpretation, and the reality that it has progressively become a mainstream force in Ethiopian Islam. Despite the fact that the approaches of Wahhabism in Ethiopia have displayed inclusiveness
and an increased openness to dialogue, the state and its ally the EIASC continued with their exclusionary stance. This, in turn, provided a justification that the unity of Islam and its true interpretation are at stake. The state was initially reluctant, however, to respond swiftly to the intra-religious conflicts within Muslims. Its action for about 5 years now has been one of siding with Sufi Muslims in purging the leadership of the EIASC from the influence of Wahhabism.

9.4 Implications

In the following three sub-sections, I look into the implications of the research in the corpus of knowledge, its contribution to theories the research employed, and its significant implications for policy and practical actions.

9.4.1 Implication for knowledge

In the religious policy discussion section, I outlined the presumption that in democratic states, the religious sector is a space where the state should exercise a stance of neutrality. The steering of religion is thus an expression of authoritarian regimes. Consistent with authoritarian regimes’ characteristics, the Ethiopian state looked at the religious space as a policy arena that it should monitor and mold towards its political program. As a result, the state continued to monitor formal religious institutions, of both Christianity and Islam, to ensure that religious identity remained subservient to its ethno-linguistic-based political programs. The overall approach has been that of reducing religion’s impact in public life and checking that the religious sector remains politically passive. In fact, the religious sector is what the state attempts to co-opt to its political agenda, and interreligious cooperation is what it envisions forging.

Due to the state’s policies that monitor and control the formal religious structures, thus, there is a pervasive perception that the formal institutions of the religious sector are under the influence of the state and do not really represent the interests of the religious communities they represent. As a result, it has become a sign of true spirituality to oppose those who assume formal religious authority. The legitimacy deficit also created room that conferred celebrity-style status on the informal religious authorities, aiding them in mobilizing the masses to emerge in the religious landscape. It is this legitimacy deficit and the popular support base that the dissidents utilized to advance the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and resist the project of the state that envisions the domestication of Ethiopian Islam.

The overall implication of the research for our knowledge is that the Ethiopian state policy towards Islam changed over the last 25 years. The analysis of the policy enables us to reject the widely circulating popular narratives. The change in the policy of the state is not the result of the claims of the opposition parties, namely the state’s divide and rule strategy to prolong its power.

338
Neither does the policy change indicate that the state followed anti-Islamic sentiment, as some dissidents and activists claim. The changes in the state policies are the results of the myriad developments within its Muslim population, the Muslim communities’ interactions with other religious communities, and geopolitical developments within the region and globally.

The relative impacts of local, regional, and global factors have also varied throughout the last quarter of a century. The power struggle within the EIASC and the competing Islamic institutions and the state’s desire to consolidate its power in the transitional state were the major factors that characterized the pre-1995 period. The overall stance of the state in this period was presenting itself as the liberator of the religiously marginalized and pursuing a policy of courting support from the Muslim community in order to consolidate its power. During this period, the impact of reform movements led to religious vitalization, and the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation had not yet become mainstream among the Muslim population.

The strongest advocates of the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation are also young returnee immigrants from neighboring countries and those educated in Saudi Arabia. The intolerance of the movement’s leaders towards folk- and Sufi-related Islamic teachings and practices led to a pejorative connotation in which the leaders were associated with financial interest, foreignness, and religious extremism. The impacts of the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation were also limited among some ethnicities, especially the Oromo and those in rural settings. Partly, the limited influence is the result of the fact that the reform advocates were represented primarily among one ethnic group, and the new ethno-linguistic policy easily conflated religious identity with ethnic identity. The existing social infrastructure between the Christians and Muslims was another constraint that made the strict demarcation of identities difficult.

Due to the failure of the Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters of Islam to mobilize the elderly for their envisioned literalist reform, they increasingly established new Islamic religious schools that advocated their own reform agenda. In the capital city, the Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters also gained popularity. Their approach, however, was different from those who held the same view in the peripheries. The approach has been an effort to transcend the decentralized nature of Ethiopian Islam. The result has been actively emphasizing the universal nature of Islam by showing solidarity with victimized Muslims throughout the world. With the development of new Islamic institutions following the new religious freedom, the representation of the Muslim communities has become an issue. The desire of the EIASC to remain the sole official representative of Ethiopian Muslims threatened the survival of the newly established Islamic institutions. The apex of the conflict between the two made it inevitable that the state should interfere to contain similar casualties in the future. In the end, the EIASC dominated the Islamic scene as the official representative of the Muslim communities.
The second half of the 1990s, however, saw Islamic radicalism become the immediate and long-term threat from the neighboring states of Sudan and Somalia. The state’s friendly stance towards the Ethiopian Muslim population remained cordial. During this period, regional developments in Somalia and Sudan had a strong bearing on its policy. Following the 1995 election that gave the EIASC a monopoly in officially representing Ethiopian Islam, the role of Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters ended in terms of formal institutions. The alternate venue for Salafi-Wahhabi interpretations became Islamic NGOs that have connections with Saudi Arabia and Gulf States, publishing houses, and individuals with their own private connections with their coreligionists outside Ethiopia. The result was that the Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters became more decentralized and informal. Consequently, with their decentralized and informal approaches the Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters effectively countered the intent of the EIASC to dominate the Islamic landscape. The Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters’ impact became more evident starting from the late 1990s, when the elderly that practice Islam in line with Sufi and popular convictions were threatened. The Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters also slowly gained representation in the EIASC, indicating the fact that in some places the interpretation earned a reputation among the Muslim communities.

The first half of the post-2001 period ushered in both local developments and the renewed attention of the world on the Horn of Africa as a troubled region susceptible to Islamic radicalism. The new alliance with the US-led GWOT and local intra-religious conflicts between the Sufi and reform-oriented Salafi-Wahhabi created an impression that the latter is a threat to religious tolerance and accommodation. During this period, the reform movements of the Salafi-Wahhabi orientation started to earn a reputation among Muslim youths in rural areas to the extent that they earned representation for themselves in the leadership of the EIASC. The result has been state support for factions of the Sufi in EIASC leadership. The state policy that supported the formal institution of the EIASC, however, did not bring significant impact upon the religious dynamics that developed in the Muslim communities. The Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation thus expanded its footing in the cities and mobilized secularly educated youths.

The result has been an increased level of Islamic activism and religious polemics with Christianity. The second half of the first decade of 2000 witnessed interreligious clashes, and the state mobilized both the formal religious representatives and NGOs in the promotion of interreligious dialogue. Since 2009, however, the state started to take an assertive strategy to strengthen formal religious organizations and undermine informally networked Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters. The conjoining of Al-Ahbash interpreters with the leadership of the EIASC, however, spurred many debates in the Muslim communities and public dissent. The state continued to support the EIASC and opposed those factions that espouse the Wahhabi interpretations of Islam.
9.4.2 Implication for theory

The overall research contributed to the theoretical discussion of collective memory, superdiversity, and informal institutions. The research outcome affirms the presentist approach of the collective memory thesis, as pioneered by Halbwachs. The schematic narrative templates that advance the historic marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims outline the objectives of the Muslim activists. The Muslim activists have become identity politics agents who reconstruct and maintain the collective memory that they feel best fits the Ethiopian Muslim communities. Their attempt is not only to voice the silenced past from the collective memories of the Ethiopian national identity. It is also to refashion the past as source of inspiration to further the political objectives of the Muslim communities in the present. Thus, the processes of reconstructing and contesting Ethiopia’s collective memory are not limited to refuting the widely held beliefs or stressing nuance as revisionist historians do. The identity reconstruction project of the activists aims to produce “a usable past” that exploits the opportunity structure of the post-1991 identity politics of the Ethiopian state.

The reconstructed memories thus are political tools that redefine the collective identity of Ethiopian Muslims to negotiate an increased role in Ethiopian politics and social ethos. The activists seized the opportunity presented in the alliance of the state and EIASC that co-opted the al-Ahbash interpretation to train the Ethiopian Muslim clergy about religious radicalism. The activists in response initiated a nationwide protest movement that emphasizes the historic marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims. The activists found the controversy “dramatic, politically relevant, or newsworthy” for mobilizing the Muslim communities. The perception is that the event (training) caused a change in the fate of Ethiopian Islam and thus made mobilization effective.

The reconstructed collective memories of the Muslim activists have turned “historical foes” into heroes (for example, Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi), symbolically deemed specific violent struggles to be crucial to understanding the Ethiopian Muslims’ self-identity (for example, Boru Meda), and identified national heroes as enemies of Ethiopian Muslims (for example, Haile Selassie). The attempt is to disregard the comforting Christian interpretations of past events in lieu of one that squares more accurately with the Muslim communities’ lived and felt experience. These selected schemas buttress the narrative that there is an existential threat to the Muslim community that has continued from the past. The overall process of reconstruction of the Muslim activists indicates that the past is often actively and selectively utilized to meet the needs of the present. The reconstructed memories are also distinct and in conflict with recorded official history.

The collective memories that were constructed exhibit distortions such as exaggeration and partiality in rewriting historical events. These activists have intentionally ignored complex causal chains by focusing only on the religious cause to mobilize the Muslim communities. The rewriting of history has redefined the historical marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims as stemming from political
and economic motivations to religious motivation. The dissemination of the religiously motivated historical marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims in Ethiopian nationhood has in turn brought a strained relationship with Ethiopian Christians who remember the nation as religiously tolerant and accommodative.

The constructed memories of the activists reflect the perceived interference of the state in the religious self-organization of the Muslim communities. The rhetoric of the continuity of the historic marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims played down and discredited the new freedom Ethiopians Muslims enjoyed in the post-1991 period. Thus, it spurred the debate over religious freedom, secularism, and the appropriate role of religion in the public and political life in light of the nation’s secular constitutional democracy. The quest of the activists is not primarily a desire to establish an Islamic state as a desired political system but rather that of the liberation of Islam from the intervention of the authoritarian state and the modification of the constitutional clauses that demand the strict separation of religion from the state. As Abbink (2014) noted, “the nature and the scope of the Ethiopian secular state” is in view.

Particularly, the constitutional clauses that state, “Education shall be free of religious influences” and “the guarantee of the independence of government from religion” are targets for the reform agendas. To the Muslim activists, the constitutional clause that prescribes the independence of the state from religion is vague and very broad. In their opinion, unless secular and religious activity are clearly demarcated, it leaves room for the government to meddle in the affairs of the religious sector. To them, religious activity is an integral part of their religious precepts and cannot be regulated, and the continual monitoring by the Ethiopian state fails to respect that tenet.

In relation to freeing education from religious influences, for the Muslim activists, it is impossible to privatize religion since in Islam no fundamental distinction could be made between the two. The MoE directive that bans the right to manifest religious symbols, the headscarf (hijab) and communal prayer (Salat), have thus become contentious. The directive is presented as an anti-religious project that intends to secularize Muslim students against the rights provided for religious freedom. The activists’ view is that the EPRDF is increasingly implementing an assertive secularism, with the state actively relegating religion to the private sphere, which is not feasible to the Ethiopian context, one of a secular state but a religious society. The suggestion is something like India’s secularism, which is soft in nature that allows public space for the religious.

To the state, the reconstructed memories and the changes demanded are disruptive and an existential threat to the religiously pluralistic societies in Ethiopia. The state views the separation of the state from religion as mutual exclusion. The state invokes a “threat narrative” against any secularism conception that opposes strict separation as an intent to dismantle the secular constitutional democracy. The threat narrative personifies the activists as the enemy of social
cohesion. The enemy image thus serves as discursive justification for an increased securitization and extraordinary measures against the Muslim communities. This raises a question about the extent to which the Ethiopian Muslim population is aware of the positive implications of secularism for a religiously diverse nation such as Ethiopia. The state’s constitutional rhetoric, however, has to be gauged by practical and pragmatic reality.

In line with the proposal by Shnirelman (2010/7, p. 1), the utility of the past in the narratives of Ethiopian Muslims exhibited two interrelated goals. The first utility is the provoking of sympathy from the larger community by presenting Ethiopian Islam as historically marginalized by the Christian kings and religious clerics. The overall purpose of such a narrative is to marshal resources by provoking sympathy from the larger community. This endeavor, however, did not produce much success since the dissenting Muslim activists did not have at their disposal strong institutions and groups that could be readily mobilized. Thus, the rewriting project has been relying mainly on the movement’s own resources without corroborating external resources, which has negatively impacted its success. The state’s prohibition of the involvement of public institution in religious matters has effectively excluded long-standing institutions, such as universities, from actively engaging in the memory reconstruction projects of the Muslim activists.

The political opportunity structure prevailing in the nation is also another constraining factor in promoting the religious marginalization of the Ethiopian Muslim communities. The EPRDF political system did not encourage people to engage independently in any sort of contentious politics. The implication of the prevalence of the EPRDF’s political system that stifles dissent is that participation in the memory construction project has become a “high-risk” venture that only few people have the courage to join. Thus, the state authoritarian political structure effectively controlled the discursive opportunity structure that provides institutional and cultural access points for the Muslim activists to pursue their attempt to influence the public policy. As a result, the production and the dissemination of the reconstructed collective memories have diminished in the existing newspapers and popular level history books. The other constraint in the dissemination of the Muslim activists voice is that the Ethiopian Muslim communities are highly decentralized, and a narrative that the diverse Muslim communities in Ethiopia could agree with and be uplifted by has become difficult.

The second goal of the Muslim activists was charging the Muslim communities with positive energy. In the collective memory narration, thus, the Ethiopian Muslim activists emphasized the nation’s virtuous character. They argued that Ethiopia was the second nation that accepted Islam, it contributed to distinguished personalities among the Sahaba (the prophet’s companions), and it presented heroic figures that the Muslim community should emulate. In reconstructing the Ethiopian image this way, the image of the greater enemy changed. The activists mostly accused the state and the EOTC as instigators of the perceived historical atrocities against the Muslim communities in
Ethiopia. The Muslim activists underemphasized the political and economic motives of the Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates.

The overall attempt of the Muslim activists is to invent compelling heroes to inspire, villains to despise, and victims to sympathize. The actual past and the prior understanding of conflictual stories, however, have greatly constrained the successful dissemination of the invented narratives. The moral appeal of the invented stories is also greatly challenged since there are no agreements about the heroes, villains, and victims. The brutalities of the Islamic sultanate against the Christian kingdom are viewed by the Muslim activists as exaggeration, inventions, and reactionary, and by far less egregious than the actions of the Christians. The prevalence of the “Ahmed Gragn Syndrome” among the Christians rejects any thesis that Islam as a religion was marginalized. The negative legacy of the incident made Christians look suspiciously upon any Islamic activity that claims public space. Any effort to rewrite Ethiopian history from the perspective of Ethiopian Islam is considered among Christians as a project of “Islamizing history,” part of the modern jihad strategy.

The religious marginalization narrative of the Muslim activists somehow creatively exploited the existing political structure that upholds the ethnic marginalization narrative of the state. The motivation for defending the thesis of religious marginalization, however, was very different for the state and Muslim activists. For the former, the overall purpose was political expediency, while for the latter it was to mobilize the Muslim community to play a more assertive role in the nationhood of Ethiopia and reclaim the past as a source of inspiration. The authority under which the state and the Muslim activists disseminate their views also differs. The authority of the state is derived from political resources, while the activists are religious. In the latter case, most of the stories are also guided by religious texts, and fundamentalist Islam posits religious accounts as infallible historical sources to defend. The activists’ reliance on Islamic religious texts and the dismissal of Christian sources also made the Christians less concerned about the historic marginalization of Muslims and their struggle for justice.

The dominance of the activists’ voice among the Muslim communities indicates that mnemonic communities could effectively resist the invented traditions of the state, unlike the thesis of the presentist approach. This is also against the thesis of the popular memory approach, which recognizes contests but discounts them as insignificant. The invention of the collective memories, however, is not so easy, neither for the state nor for the Muslim activists. Despite the state and the Muslim activists’ invention of the past for the instrumentality of the present, the actual past itself constrained the creative imagination. The symbiotic relationship between the Ethiopian states and the EOTC made the inventions difficult and a point of contest.

In the process of reconstructing a usable past, religious texts are part of the contest. In the formation of collective memories, the self-understanding of Ethiopian Muslims and Christians is also
mediated by the sacred religious texts that speak to the communities. The Muslim activists are reading their own religious texts as a form of resistance against the predominance of memory as promoted by the Christians and official history. Part of the contest is that the EOTC adherents and its strong institutions were also the custodians of Ethiopian history via its religious texts and the chronicles that EOTC adherents wrote. Similar to the Islamic religious texts, EOTC adherents viewed their own religious sources both as theological writings and as infallible sources for constructing history. The result has been that of a contest in which one discards the other. Among the Christian communities, thus, the revisionist attempt from the Muslim communities and the marginalization narrative they espoused became an object of suspicion. Added to it are increasing polemical kinds of literature and encounters between the two communities lacking in sensitivity for religious traditions. In this process, the current geopolitical and global dynamic and developments within have complicated the process of othering. In line with the long-held presumption within the country, framing the other as foreign was a means employed. The internal power struggle within the Islamic religious communities and the fact that the Sufi-oriented Muslims dominate the EIASC affected negatively the success of the Salafi-oriented Muslim activists’ narrative. Thus, the narratives of the Muslim activists failed to be “unifying, consensual, and uplifting” across the Ethiopian Muslim communities. The Sufi-oriented Muslims, despite upholding that the Christian kings marginalized the Muslim communities, also emphasize the nation’s religiously accommodating culture.

The research also provided useful insights in relation to superdiversity. In line with the superdiversity thesis, I found that there is a low degree of presupposability in relation to the Islamic reform movements’ identities. The research provides evidence for the claim of superdiversity. In line with its thesis, the emerging diversity suggests that the uncritical essentialist identity categories used by insititutions to monitor population are inadequate and inappropriate. The traditional categories of Wahhabism and Sufism exhibit both dynamism and complexity, unlike the essentialist thesis.

In line with the analytical division by which Wiktorowicz (2006) classifies the Salafism movements across the world, the Ethiopian Salafi-Wahhabi movement tends to fall under the category of purists. Like the purists, Salafi-Wahhabi advocates tend to emphasize nonviolent methods of propagation, the need for Islamic purification, and the value of education. The fact that they recognize the secular state as the legitimate authority to legislate also excludes them from the politicos (those who approve participation in politics but in nonviolent ways). They are also not jihadis since they do not espouse violence and revolution to implement their goals.

The purist classification also does not fit the Ethiopian Salafi-Wahhabi adherents very well. Unlike the purists’ thesis, they encourage overt activism to demand constitutional rights and the self-ascribed role of defending Ethiopian Islam from corruption. Also unlike the purists, the Salafi-
Wahhabis in Ethiopia are willing to cooperate with both the West and the Christians on matters other than faith. The advocates of the dissident movement in the Diaspora even forged an allegiance with the exiled EOTC synod in the US. They appealed to religious freedom institutions of the West and filed cases in international courts. The youth who become Hafiz, those who memorized the Quran, had a graduation ceremony where they wore Western-style suits and not an Arab way of dress.

Despite what the Salafi-Wahhabi advocates of the dissidents envision, which is for Islam to remain the primary characteristic of their identity, the same vocal personalities are also activists related with ethnicity. In fact, in moments when ethnic-related conflicts surface, mostly in the Oromia region, the Islamic activism subsides and the attention of the activists turns to advocacy related to ethnic marginalization. These patterns, similar to the suggestions of superdiversity, indicate not the absence of order but rather the presence of interaction, interdependence, and coherence within the belief system.

I noted that the traditional demarcation of fixed boundaries in terms of an either/or binary is increasingly becoming more difficult. The discourse of the Al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam and Wahhabism fosters the blurring of boundaries. What classifies an interpretation as foreign or local is not clear, and there is much subjectivity involved in the process. For Al-Ahbash interpreters, Ethiopian Islam represents teaching that originated in Ethiopia and that accommodates the Ethiopian Muslim cultures. The criteria have been the accommodation of the existing practices in Sufism and popular Islam and the promotion of religious tolerance and accommodation. For Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters, however, what makes them Ethiopian is continuing the legacies of the first asylum seekers who depended on the revealed scripture and those who followed faithfully their perspective. Particularly, the fact that the founder of the Al-Ahbash interpretation is from Ethiopia and his teachings were mainly received abroad rather than in Ethiopia makes it difficult to classify the interpretation either as foreign or as part of historic Ethiopian Islam.

Unlike the essentialist view of Wahhabism as rigid religious reform, the movement is a complex phenomenon. Those who advocate the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam are usually assumed to espouse strict religious ideology devoid of local contexts and developments. The Salafi-Wahhabi advocates, however, did not remain the same over the last 25 years. In terms of their attitude towards Sufi Islam and folk Islam, even if it did not change at the cognitive level, the emotive and the behavioral elements were significantly modified. At the emotive level, the presentation of Sufi and folk Islam has increasingly become one of sympathy rather than passing strong judgments of denouncement. In terms of actions also, the violent incidents perpetrated by Salafi-Wahhabi adherents have significantly declined. As a result, violent clashes among the Muslim communities have declined. Besides the changes in attitudes, the divisive stand of the movement also dwindled and the emphasis has been that of unity. The traditional mark that characterizes the Salafi-Wahhabi
interpreters and is non-negotiable has been the rejection of Mawlid (the celebration of the prophet’s birth). The emphasis on Mawlid as non-negotiable, however, significantly declined as a point of contention.

In the essentialist thesis, the Salafi-Wahhabi advocates’ literalism also precludes the endorsement of secular states dominated by Christians. In the Ethiopian case, with a few exceptions, the overall approach has been that of demanding secularism as the way forward. There is an increased level of openness to recognizing religious plurality. Because the popular preachers and the Muslim activists have a secular background, democratic rights-based language has also become very common. Despite the fact that the movement leaders construed that there is national oppression at the state level, they unanimously denounce violence as a way forward. The realization that Islam and religious radicalism are very frequently conjoined in the global media partly explains their espousal of a peaceful strategy. This does not mean, however, that the Muslim activists’ approaches have become pacifist, but rather that there is an increasing level of willingness to subsume religious ideals as pragmatically constrained.

Another important factor that has a strong bearing on the notion of superdiversity is the Diaspora Muslim communities. With the new mobile technologies, Internet communication, and travel opportunities, members of the Diaspora communities remain actively connected to their sources of origin. The identity of the Diaspora communities’ members also indicates an imprint of the communities in which they live and from which they have come, creatively combining the human rights language of the hosting country and the religious fundamentalism of their sources of origin. Distance does not separate them from their sources of origin. In fact, distance has provided them some advantages that the locals cannot freely enjoy. In a relative sense, they can marshal resources that enable them to influence developments happening within the boundaries of Ethiopia. Moreover, it provides them opportunities to be observed as neutral in the process of negotiation and reconciliation of differences within the Muslim communities. It also empowers them to frame questions in light of human rights language and advocacy for the rights of the Muslim communities. It also gives them an opportunity to negotiate the needs of the Muslim communities with the state.

The Diaspora community’s presence in the online context has created additional opportunities. The dissidents can access counternarratives and use the online context as an alternative dialogue. The result has been that the state media fails to have a monopoly in the discourse. Despite the advantages, however, the Diaspora community’s assessment differs a great deal from the needs of the community in Ethiopia. In its depiction of the realities on the ground, it depends on anecdotal evidence, thus giving it the opportunity to create its own hyper-reality when the reality on the ground is quite blurred.
The Diaspora Muslim communities were also able to side with both opposition parties and the exiled synod that opposes the synod in Ethiopia. Their doing so, however, has become both a burden and a blessing to the local community. Positively speaking, it feeds positively into the narrative that the movement is national, there is no foreign interest, and it is all about religious freedom and not religious dominance of Islam over Christianity. What has become its disadvantage, however, is that political questions are mingled with religious ones, giving an impression that it is not only religious. Moreover, the inviting of foreign imam speakers to the annual summit also feeds the suspicion that the movement is militant.

The protest movement has also provided evidence that the strict categorization of boundaries does not hold true. Specifically, the strict categorization of the Sufi against the Wahhabi adherents did not work. Even if the movement leaders unanimously espouse the literalist interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith, following the examples of the first three generations, those who are following them hold varying interpretations of Islam. The followers’ unity, thus, is not due to the Salafi interpretation of Islam but rather to the narrative that the state is imposing a foreign sect upon the Muslim communities. It indicates the fact that people can have different levels of unity based on the specific agenda tabled before them. The activism also runs counter to the claims that the literalist Muslims are against the modernist formation of democratic ideals and the call for reformation are movements that resist modernity. Rather, they selectively appropriate modernist ideas and projects in a very different manner than one might expect. The secular education effect is also evident, even though their impacts are also colored by their strict commitment to religious ideas and texts.

The dissidents also demonstrate that formal institutions matter only if they are functional and affect the competitive space in which various forms of Islam are represented. The perception that the majority of Ethiopians are Sufi and they should lead the Muslim communities does not work. The movement has indicated that the authority of the Muslim community is not monolithic but rather diverse. This indicates that there are many mainstream views that cannot be put in one box and allegiance surpasses traditional boundaries. The narrative that the two identities are inherently contradictory and they do not have room for negotiations is not right. Part of the negotiation is also showing sympathy and deferring one’s cause for some near future. The overall context in which the movement operates is one in which a Christian Ethiopia has also affected the meaning and the means. The prevailing narrative in historic Ethiopia that Muslims are violent when they assume power and the polemics that emphasize the same also tamed and put the activists into a defense posture in which they claim that Islam is a religion of peace without claiming, however, a pacifist stance on the matter.

The role of the Internet and new information technology has also provided an alternate space in which narratives and counternarratives circulate. It provided an opportunity where everyone could be
his or her own authority via one’s own subjectivity. In this regard, however, the roles of Muslim activists are profound. Activists as an agent of signification played a role of providing a schematic narrative template in which seemingly contradictory evidence could make sense. The level of consensus that emerged was also somehow mediated by the religious texts that the communities take for granted as inspired and infallible.

In relation to informal institutions, it is also clear that the state supports and promotes one interpretation of Islam over the other. The informal institutions also made clear that public activism, whether religious or otherwise, that is not under the purview and the guidance of the state does not last and becomes the target of the state. The decision of the court and its immediate application implied that the interest of the state is to control any kind of activism that threatens its power to control religious institutions. The various state documentaries also indicate the intentions of the state.

Consistent with the prediction of the informal institutions, there are also regularities in the actions of the state that indicate the prevalence of informal institutions in relation to the religious sector. The actions of the state towards the dissident Muslims and the dissident leaders, and its relation with EIASC leaders, indicate that the state watches out for political activism within the religious, and it co-opts and deploys the formal religious institutions for its own political program. The fact that the dissident Muslims were motivated by the 2011 Arab Spring collective actions, they opposed the domestication of Islam by the state, they presented their case in human rights language, and they sought the independence of the EIASC led to their prosecution. The fact that the state unwaveringly supported EIASC leaders that it perceived would promote its ethno-linguistic political program, keep a lower profile in political activism, and mobilize the religious for the state’s ventures indicates how the state bends the religious leadership to its own end.

The brutal actions of the police force towards the peaceful demonstrators, the verdict of the court, and the pardoning of some of the accused indicate that the violation of informal rules is severely punishable. On contrast, the fact that ETV, as an agent of social control of the state, ignored the injunction of the court not to air a documentary that implicates the accused and the officials that violated the injunction remained unpunished implies that the formal rules are subservient to the informal rules. The state officials’ frequent negative characterizations of Wahhabism as a foreign and extremist version of Islam while the same officials publicly extolled the Al-Ahbash interpretation as an indigenous and peaceful version of Islam indicates which interpretation the government supports or opposes. These all, however, do not indicate that the state pursues an inherently anti-Islamic policy but rather indicates that the state is intolerant of any independent activity that it perceives to undermine its hegemony.
9.4.3 Implications for practice

The findings from the Ethiopian state’s policy towards Islam have implications for both practice and policy. Some of these are highlighted below. The siding of the state with the majority Sunni Sufi interpreters with the conception that there is only one mainstream Islam is ill informed. It would have been better to recognize the existing diversity within the Muslim community and mediate the process in a neutralist stance. The categorization of Salafi-Wahhabi advocates as people with a coveted religious aspiration, following the essentialist view, also fails to take into account the fact that the local interacts with the global. The essentialist view thus ignores the Ethiopian reality and local conditions that determine the identity of the movement.

The essentialist perspective also fails to see that the Salafi-Wahhabi endorse the formally secular state and are increasingly willing to work pragmatically alongside other interpretations of Islam and Christianity. To perceive Salafi-Wahhabi interpretations as inherently antithetical to the secularization thesis ignores the movement’s willingness to live under secular constraints. The exclusivist stance of the state that discredits the Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation forges the potential benefits of an inclusive approach. Inclusivity in approach is part of a normalizing process of religious groups that have an extremist agenda. The state holds a cynical view that the religious fall prey easily to extremism. A more positive view of the religious adherents, as partners in the identification and combating of extremism, would create a grassroots strength that champions religious freedom and equality as democratic ideals.

The state officials’ public praise of the Al-Ahbash interpreters, with a few disclaimers, counters the state’s denial that it is interfering in the intra-religious affairs of the Islamic communities. The co-opting of the Lebanese trainers of the interpretation as informants to the Islamic religious communities and the state officials should not be the way forward. The inherent enmity of the Salafi-Wahhabi interpreters and the Al-Ahbash precludes the possibility of passing along neutral information. It would have been better if the state had employed panels of experts in Islam that did not side themselves with a particular reform movement in order to understand the dynamics and the stakes involved.

The view that studying about religion is unconstitutional and the only permissible option is learning from religions is not a feasible way forward for nations like Ethiopia in which the citizens identify themselves as religious. The state should also establish religious studies departments either as part of the structure of existing universities or else as independent institutions so that people could understand the dynamics of religions and expand the influence of the secularist thesis it advocates. Whenever the study of religion is unburdened from religious traditions, the possibility of objective stances and constructive dialogues abound. Such a direction is inevitable, given that the religiosity of the people is significant. To exclude such discussions from academics disservices rather than helps
what the state envisioned. The state should recognize that there are diversities in reform movements and a simplistic categorization does not help.

The way the judiciary served justice also discredits the claims of the state. Particularly, the leaked documentaries of ETV and the testimonies of the dissident representatives implied that there were human rights violations. The overriding of the court injunction that prohibited the airing of the documentaries, the arbitrary dropping of charges for some and continuing the others, the pardoning of some without sufficient grounds, and the twisting by the media of some facts on the ground are not without effect. They create a legitimacy deficit for the state and the validation of the counternarratives the state vigorously attempts to discredit and to defend. The implication of such an approach is a loss of trust in the justice system and the nurturing of a belief that political expediency is the primary motive of the state.

The Ethiopian religious society is indeed accommodating. The accommodation, however, is not the result of an open dialogue. In the absence of dialogue, hearsay and rumors have strongholds. The growing fundamentalist orientation among the religious traditions also undermines the economic and political dynamics that shape the society and exaggerates the role of religion. In the fundamentalist orientation, the use of religious texts as incontestable authorities and sources of history also becomes problematic. This orientation ignores alternate narratives in both the religious communities. As the religious increasingly perceive their own leaders as being co-opted by the state for political ends, the power of formal religious authorities in shaping the attitude of the adherents significantly declines. The decline of formal religious authorities is not without consequence. The void of leadership creates room for religious entrepreneurs.

The lack of a self-critical stance within one’s own religious traditions, as if the religious leaders and followers were spotless saints, also washes away the opportunities for correcting injustices and promoting reconciliation. In this regard, the role of the interreligious council should go beyond repeating the same rhetoric of the state. The state and the interreligious council have repeatedly claimed that the religious landscape of Ethiopia was culturally accommodating, all religions teach peace, and all religions should cooperate with each other and the state to promote peace, democracy, and development.

Notwithstanding the value of promoting the above claims, the interreligious council should also create a venue or a stage where an informed discussion in the spirit of cooperation takes place. Otherwise, the repeating of the state’s agenda that relates only to peace, development, and democracy gives the impression that the council and the religious institutions that created it are the voices of the state. The forums should expand their areas of impact by including theological and historical issues so that the communities could understand the real differences with a sense of graciousness. The religious authorities should also actively involve their respective seminaries and
scholars in interreligious dialogue as well as working in cooperation with experts in religious fields to bring about the envisioned result.

Notwithstanding the grains of truths and the causes that dissidents and activists champion, the rhetoric of sensibility is not without a problem. The strict categorization of the state, the EIASC, and the dissidents ruled out the possibility of dialogue and meaningful negotiations. The narratives created have become so totalitarian that they are not self-correcting, even though constructive criticism frequently surfaces from either within or outside the religious communities. The problematic characteristics of the dissidents are a failure to be ready to accept a gradual solution to the perceived problems, the desire to dominate the formal institutions, and unwillingness to negotiate in the presence of the other that they consider religiously deviant.

The mutual exclusion of the other from the religious community and framing it as anti-Islamic made the Islamic religious space a hostile ground. Changing this would require nurturing a religious dialogue that accepts theological differences as alternate expressions of Islam within the Muslim communities. In this regard, the `ulama dialogue forum could serve as a working model. The demonizing of the other as anti-Islamic hinders any kind of negotiation from being brought to fruition.

In the context of diversity, a sense of openness and willingness to accommodate the needs of others in order to live peacefully in a shared space is required. The selective use of scientific knowledge, the avoidance of historical nuances, praising one’s own religious tradition and being critical of the other, framing disagreements as irreconcilable, and failing to present our opinions as tentative conclusions are also not without effect. There is also a need to look into one’s religious traditions from a critical distance. The Al-Ahbash interpreters are endorsing all the accusations, including that the Wahhabi are conspiring against the Christians, and thereby attempting to marshal the Christian communities. Such uncritical allegiance, however, increases the divide in the already deteriorating Christian-Muslim social infrastructures. The perception that the acceptance of religious ideals and doctrines is independent of one’s social location is also not fruitful. There has to be a readiness to receive the other. The manipulation of political authorities to advance one’s religious interpretation and feed simplistic versions of the other interpretation is not helpful.

There is an increasing willingness and desire of the Ethiopia Muslim Diaspora communities to engage in developments in Ethiopia. Given that it could marshal resources, financial and human, the religious community and the state should view the interest positively. The Diaspora community’s attempt to create reconciliation with the diverse religious communities is also positive. The conspiracy narratives of the Diaspora community, however, are not contributing positively to the Ethiopian religious community. The tendencies to label others as anti-Islamic and to ascribe to oneself the guardian role of Ethiopian Islam have quite a negative effect.
The fundamentalist orientations of Diaspora community members have also made cyberspace a conflictual space and promoted the formation of negative views towards other religious traditions. Defining the other as a sect and continually fighting them as enemies also undermines the reconciliatory role the community wishes to play. The Diaspora Muslim community’s concern for human rights violations exhibits a defensive posture that is at times unhelpful, as it fails to criticize even negative developments within the Islamic religious communities. Religious allegiances seem to dominate at times over human rights concerns.

In the globalized world, the value of new technologies and the Internet cannot be overlooked or underestimated. It provides new opportunity sets. It makes communication easy, increases speed, and allows wider participation. The new media also increases, decentralizes, and diversifies the available information. The medium is a venue for passionate expression, display of honesty, inclusion of new voices, and greater openness. Notwithstanding the above benefits, however, the advantage of face-to-face communication should not be forgotten.

What Ethiopian Muslim activists are constructing in the media is creating a paradoxical notion of a mediated phenomenon that appears to be more real than the reality on the ground. The activists’ focus on conflictual accounts does not fit with the historical peaceful coexistence. The monologues and the hyperrealism could be curbed if interfaith dialogue groups were created at the community level. Periodic face-to-face communication would also serve as an appropriate venue to develop more intimacy and friendship. The historical discourses that are now monopolized by Muslim activists should extend also to the wider Muslim communities. The collective memories being advanced, however, display a sense of supremacy and competition. There is a tendency for hegemony, claiming truthfulness for oneself while accusing the other as deceitful. There is still not a readiness to accept a nuanced view of reality. Critical stances towards one’s own religious sources are also severely lacking.

The critiques directed towards the other indicate that the memory entrepreneurs’ grasp of the other’s perspective is poor. As the fringe is presented as mainstream, the mainstream is ignored as irrelevant. There also needs to be more sensitivity towards others. The collective memory construction process of Ethiopian Muslim activism and Christian responses still waits for memory entrepreneurs who envision convergence in the interest of the two communities by recognizing interdependence. Complex historical repositories like that of Ethiopia require seasoned historians, theologians, and religious leaders to forge alliances. There is also a great need for empirical works in relation to collective memories in Ethiopia.
9.5 Recommendations for Further Research

In my research endeavor, I encountered many interesting insights that require further research initiatives. One of these was the fact that religious fundamentalism characterizes both dissidents and Muslim activists. In fact, religious fundamentalism is not unique to Ethiopian Islam since it is also evident among Protestants and the EOTC. It is thus a fruitful area for further research exploration. Inherent to the religious fundamentalism in Ethiopian Islam also lay the religious texts, both the Quran and the Hadith. I observed that the authority of religious scriptures and traditions is deeply entrenched in the hearts of the believers, not only in providing meaning but also in unlocking the past and guiding their present actions. The impact of the religious texts in forming the opinions of the Muslim communities still waits for further research. The way in which the texts are appropriated to fit the context is also another interesting issue. The increasing use of religious sources, primarily written in Arabic, for writing popular level historical works also deserves attention.

In the research, I also observed that the Internet and information technology provided new opportunities for interactions with coreligionists and followers of other religions abroad and within Ethiopia. In this regard, the Internet as a relatively unregulated free space, the dynamics involved, and its impact on the formation of religious identity are other points of interest for further investigation. A corollary to this is the role of the media, both in representing and in creating narratives. In relation to this, it is also interesting to look into the online Islamic radio and television networks.

I also noted that globally acclaimed Islamic preachers are gaining prominence among the youth, and their practices are increasingly emulated among the Ethiopian Islamic preachers, creating a culture of religious celebrities. Moreover, any attempt to criticize the celebrity preachers faces fierce opposition. The impact of prominent Islamic preachers upon local Muslim religious celebrities in terms of their content, their method, and their ambitions requires further study. In relation to Islamic preaching in Ethiopia, I observed very frequently that a comparative approach surfaces, especially in relation to Christian virtues and moral conduct. The question is why is Christianity what is invoked and how does the historic Christian-Muslim relationship relate to such approaches.

The tension between religious identity and ethnic identity in relation to being local and trans-local have not been investigated sufficiently. Particularly, it would be of interest to examine why the Ethiopian Diaspora Muslims feel at ease in combining the ethnic-related questions with those of religious identity while Muslim activists in Ethiopia shy away. The involvement of the Diaspora communities in the Ethiopian religious scene, especially in forming opinions, needs to be studied.

Relatively speaking, there is an increased rate of religious conversions, both from Christianity to Islam and from Islam to Christianity. The nature of conversion is an interesting research question. Of particular interest is how the converted ones are shaping the attitudes of the new community they
joined as they tell their previous faith journey. More specifically, the image that they present about their previous faith and faith community and how the presented image is affecting contemporary Christian-Muslim relations deserves much more emphasis.
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