Social and political contexts of religious conversion in Sidaama, Ethiopia, 1891-1974

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Abstract

This article discusses religious conversion in Sidaama, Ethiopia, 1891-1974. The Sidaama area is in Southern Ethiopia, southeast of Lake Hawassa and northeast of Lake Abaya in the Rift Valley of Ethiopia. Most of the population belongs to the ethnic group Sidaama, speakers of the Cushitic language Sidaamu Afoo. The region became incorporated into the Ethiopian Empire during the twentieth century. The article will first provide a historical overview of religious change in the area. Next, the paper will present theoretical approaches to religious conversion. The article's main content focuses on the interreligious encounter between the indigenous Sidaama religion and varieties of Christianity. The paper will discuss how the interreligious encounter initiated a process of conversion to Christianity. The conversion process occurred at the intersection between indigenous Sidaama converts and various forms of Christianity and was influenced by internal social tensions and inequalities in Sidaama.

Keywords: religious conversion, indigenous Sidaama religion, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Christian missions, Ethiopia.

Introduction

Religious conversion is a significant theme in the cultural history of wider Ethiopia (Kaplan, 2004: 372-375). Three major political and religious expansions have intersected Southern Ethiopia. The Christian Ethiopian Empire expanded from the north, the Oromo (- previously termed "Galla") from the south, and the Muslim states from the east. The oldest written sources are Ethiopian Imperial chronicles from the thirteenth century, Arab historiographers from the sixteenth century, and accounts by travellers (Braukämper, 1973: 29-30). The Christian Ethiopian Empire advanced southwards during the rule of Amda-Ṣeyon 1 (1314-44). Later, the Muslim Oromo (Galla) migrations in the second half of the sixteenth century created overlapping religious influences (Tadesse Tamrat, 1972: 173, 184-185; Trimingham, 1965: 180-183). The intersection between political and religious groups created an overlapping environment for conversions and reconversions. The populations adhered to indigenous religious practices, but the interaction between Islam and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church probably influenced religious practices and concepts. This interaction resulted in syncretic practices combining elements of Christianity, Islam, and African Religion (Haberland, 1964: 237-238; Braukämper, 1992: 195-197).

This article focuses on the 1890s to the Ethiopian revolution in 1974. During the rule of emperor Menelik II (1889-1913), regions of Southern Ethiopia became incorporated into the Ethiopian Empire due to political-military expansion. After the conquest, Sidaama became integrated into the feudal economy of the Ethiopian Empire. The Ethiopian government attempted to modernise the region during Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974). From the 1950s, the

increased cultivation of coffee contributed to economic transformations and integration into a global market economy.

The integration into the Ethiopian state resulted in new inter-religious encounters. The indigenous Sidaama were adherents to indigenous religious practices. During the twentieth century, settlers from various regions of Ethiopia established congregations of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) in administrative locations in the Sidaama area. Furthermore, the integration into the Empire also created contexts for global connections to Catholic and Protestant missions starting from the 1930s. Ethiopia was invaded and occupied by Italy (1935-1941). After the Ethiopian Empire's restoration, the government started modernising the Sidaama area. One strategy was to invite foreign mission organisations who provided medical and educational assistance. As a result, the number of foreign missions increased during the 1950s and 1960s. In the Sidaama area, the missions had various confessional backgrounds: Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Adventist, and Pentecostal. In addition to education and health services, the missions focused on the propagation of Christian faith, and these activities created settings for religious conversions and the establishment of Christian groups.

The political and religious changes in Sidaama provide a point of departure for research questions related to religious conversion. Thus, religious transformation raises questions about how and why change has happened. There are usually two broad approaches to this question: one claims that religious change results from societal, political or economic transformations, and the other focuses on changes in belief systems related to external influences such as mission activity. In practice, both of these explanations are at work. The article will discuss how the conversion process was a religious encounter between indigenous Sidaama converts and varieties of Christianity and influenced by internal social tensions and inequalities in Sidaama society.

Theoretical perspectives: Religious conversion

Theoretical perspectives on religious conversion emphasise themes such as rupture and personal change (Rambo, 1993; Robbins, 2007) or as a reorganisation in systems of belief and meaning (Horton, 1971, 1975a, 1975b, Hefner, 1993). However, in inter-religious encounters, change from one religious tradition to another includes varieties and variations. In African Christianity, this encounter consists of continuity with indigenous religion and encounters with multiple forms of Christianity. This setting for religious change demands a movement away from the perception of religions as discrete systems of belief (Ranger, 1987: 182-183). Furthermore, individual change in faith cannot explain the broader socio-religious contexts for change. As such, religious conversion in African contexts relates to societal changes due to colonialism or the hegemonic worldviews of missions (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991: 249-251). Other perspectives on conversion focus more on the agents involved in converting as part of a process. In this sense, people convert to new belief systems that provide better explanations and coherence. When boundaries of local systems and microcosms become weakened, people convert to new doctrines based on universal belief systems that provide more sufficient explanations (Horton, 1971: 101-105; Horton, 1975a: 220, 234; Horton, 1975b: 381, 392-93). On the other hand, religious conversion is not only restricted to changes in belief systems and better explanations but also connected to changes in power relations and the material interests of communities. Therefore, social identity and membership in a new religious community are also essential to religious conversion and provide converts access to religious alternative control (Hefner, 1993: 20-21, 24-25).

In the following sections, the article will explore how societal, political or economic transformations influenced the interreligious encounter in Sidaama.

1891: Incorporation into the Ethiopian Empire

The gradual territorial expansion of the Ethiopian Empire in the 1890s led to an integration of ethnic groups and a consolidation of ethnic boundaries in Southern Ethiopia (Knutsson, 1969: 86-87; Levine, 1974: 80-86, 183-184). The earliest military conquest of the Sidaama area started in 1891 (Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, 1971: 180-181; Donham, 1986: 3-4). The incorporation implied a gradual transformation of the social and political system of the Sidaama. Anthropological research on Sidaama society describes some of the functions of the traditional social organisation based on patrilineal clans. Clan leadership was gerontocratic and consisted of assemblies of adult males who attained status through initiation into age classes named *luwa* (in Sidaamu Afoo) (Stanley & Karsten, 1968: 93-95; Hamer, 1970: 55-57, 67-68). Oral traditions provide information about the historical consciousness and identity of the Sidaama. The group consisted of twelve clans that traced their origin to mythical clan founders Maldea and Bushshe. Origin narratives of the clan founders may be reconstructed and compared with genealogies and indicate that the origin of the Sidaama ethnic group in their current location is approximately between 1590 and 1665 (Braukämper, 1978: 128; Hamer, 1978: 134).

During 1894-95, the political conquest of the Sidaama area continued. Ethiopian military garrisons were established on the borders between local Sidaama clans, stabilising and fixing internal boundaries between clans (McClellan, 1988: 27). The Ethiopian imperial system for conquered areas was based on indirect rule. This system of governance implied a transformation in political and religious leadership roles. For example, clan leaders, named *moote* (in Sidaamu Afoo), were given the Ethiopian administrative title *balabat* (in Amharic). Leaders functioned as intermediaries between the imperial rulers and their subjects (Donham, 1986: 38-39). The incorporation into the Ethiopian state implied socioeconomic changes. The Sidaama belongs to the ensete agricultural complex in Southern Ethiopia (Shack, 1968). The subsistence was based on a mixed economy, combining cultivation of the staple product *Ensete ventricosum*, also called the Ethiopian banana or "false banana plant", with pastoralism. The geographical area consists of three ecological zones at differing altitudes and with different production and settlement patterns.

Within two decades after the conquest, the imperial land system, known as the *näṭäňňa - gäbbar* system (in Amharic), was implemented. In this system, the Sidaama became clients or tenant farmers (*gäbbar*). They supplied the Ethiopian rulers, primarily soldiers in the beginning (*näṭäňňa* – meaning "rifleman" in Amharic), with products and labour. At first, the tenants retained the ownership of their land. Later, the land system changed. After 1917, the settler population increased (Bairu Tafla, 1969: 16-18). Uncultivated land was measured and distributed, distinguishing between coffee and ensete-producing areas. The government implemented a new system of land distribution, and many Sidaama became tenants on the land they formerly owned. Coffee production expanded in the central (Alatta Wondo area) and southern areas of Sidaama (Hadicho/Darra area) (McClellan, 1986: 177-178). The increase in the settler population implied that the military garrisons transformed into town centres. In 1917, Hagere Selam was founded. Yrga Alem was founded around the year 1930. The expansion of trade and building of roads created possibilities for interaction between village communities and settlers from different regions of the Ethiopian Empire, as well as foreign traders, medical personnel and foreign Christian missions (Jensen, 1936: 66-67; Pankhurst 1985: 196-198).

Inter-religious relations: indigenous Sidaama religion and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Integrating the Sidaama into the Ethiopian state created new contexts for religious encounters. From the 1890s, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) established churches in the recently formed town centres and settler areas. The exact number of churches in the

Sidaama area is unknown. The existing information provides some numbers related to the distribution of churches consecrated to patron saints, but only at a provincial level (Stitz, 1975: 12-13, 19).[1]

The foundation of churches functioned as spatial-symbolic markers of the imperial state and connected to the foundation of garrisons. Thus, early church buildings were built at Bule in 1896 and Chisha in 1900 (McClellan, 1978: 60; Tolo, 1998: 68). There is no information about any new churches built until the foundation at Abera and at Hagere Selam in 1917, where governor Dejazmach Balča Aba Näfso founded the Kidane Mahret (first at Abera, later moved to Hagere Selam), Medhane Alem, Giyorgis and Sellasie churches (McClellan, 1978: 93-95). There is also an indication that Balča took the initiative to let the EOTC start religious education for settler children. On the other hand, there does not seem to have been plans to teach or convert the indigenous population (Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, 1971: 176). In settler areas outside the garrison towns, there is little information about the foundation of new churches. Likely, comparison with observations made in the neighbouring Gedeo area, where the foundation of new churches took place at sites with a high density of settler populations, which in turn provided the economic basis supporting the local church (McClellan, 1978: 172, 174-175).

The EOTC did not conduct active evangelism towards the Sidaama, who adhered to indigenous Sidaama religious practices. Anthropological research has described how the religious practices of Sidaama were part of domestic and economic relations. One of the practices was ancestor veneration, named *akaako* (in Sidaamu Afoo). Furthermore, there was belief in spirits, named *sheexaane* (in Sidaamu Afoo), which ritual specialists mediated. These spirit possession practices were related to notions of health and disease. Finally, there was a conception about the existence of a sky god and creator being, named *Maganu* (in Sidaamu Afoo) (Hamer & Hamer, 1966: 393-394; Vecchiato, 1985: 235-238, 244, 253; Brøgger, 1986: 71-73).

Research on African religions has pointed out that one should avoid perceiving ethno-religious practices as static religious entities (Ranger, 1987: 30, 36-37; Ranger, 1993: 67-68). As the article previously pointed out, there has been a longstanding historical interaction between religious traditions in Southern Ethiopia. In the case of the Sidaama, the incorporation into the Ethiopian Empire created new inter-religious dynamics. Later sources and research revealed new possession cults, spirits of various origins, and local prophets in Southern Ethiopia after the imperial conquest (Knutsson, 1967: 152; Balisky, 2009: 93-95). As such, the interaction created contexts for the gradual change of indigenous religion over time through external religious influences.

There was interaction between the EOTC and Sidaama ethno-religious practices in the decades following the conquest. Research conducted in the 1960s and 1970s indicated how new foreign spirits and possessions cults had entered the spirit possession cults in the decades after the conquest (Hamer & Hamer 1966: 404-407; Brøgger, 1986: 73). Others have provided social and structural explanations for the changes in the relationship between authority and the role of religious and political leaders in Southern Ethiopian societies. After the Ethiopian conquest, the role of the leaders became "ethiopianised". Some of the *balabats* converted to Orthodox Christianity to strengthen their social status towards the imperial state, but this probably weakened their social position among the local population (McClellan, 1978: 273-274, 287-288; McClellan, 1986: 192-193; Donham, 1986: 45).

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[1] The statistics for churches dedicated to patron saints only provide information at a provincial level for the "Sidamo" province. This former administrative province consisted of a wider geographical region than the subject group of this article.

Although few Sidaama converted to the EOTC, the wider population was probably indirectly exposed to influences from Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. One reason was that most farmers were tenants of Ethiopian landlords. By being part of the *näftäňňa-gäbbar* system, they contributed to and probably participated in feast days for Saints and monthly religious celebrations (McClellan, 1978: 145-146). These experiences influenced the content of later conversion narratives among converts to Protestant Christianity. For example, descriptions by the early Christian converts to Protestant missions were predominantly hostile toward the EOTC (Tolo, 1998: 87-89). One of the reasons for the resentment among the Sidaama was the perception of a connection between the EOTC and the economic system imposed by the landlords (McClellan, 1986: 183; Tolo, 1998: 81-82, 85-86, 89-92). However, another practical reason for reluctance towards conversion may be related to fasting practices in the EOTC, which were incompatible with the local Sidaama diet that consisted of dietary products (Hamer, 2002: 606). However, despite negative perceptions of the EOTC, the religious encounter was likely a pre-conversion stage for later religious change among the Sidaama, creating curiosity and interest in alternate religious worldviews.

1928-1941: The establishment of foreign missions and the Italian invasion

In 1928, the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), an inter-denominational Anglo-American organisation, established mission stations in the Garbichcho area and at Homacho (near Alatta Wondo). Later, the SIM founded a mission in the town of Yrga Alem. In 1932, the first four converts became baptised at Homacho. The missionaries translated the Gospel of Mark into Sidaamu Afoo with local assistants (Fargher 1996: 41, 132-134, 156-157). In 1931, the Catholic Capuchins founded a mission at Bera, south of Yrga Alem. The mission started a school at Bera for children of settlers. In 1936, the missionaries abandoned the mission due to the Italian invasion of Southern Ethiopia (Antonius Alberto, 2013: 236).

Fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and occupied the country until 1941 (Sbacchi, 1985: 32). In Southern Ethiopia, the Italian conquest of Ethiopia led to a lack of political and military control and consequently started rebellions against Ethiopian authorities among indigenous populations (Braukämper, 2011: 166-167). In October 1936, the Sidaama area was conquered by the Italians. The Ethiopian imperial army withdrew to the Arbegona district, and in 1937, fighting continued with battles at Yrga Alem and Arbegona (Del Boca, 1969: 116-118). After the conquest, the Italians established control but still experienced resistance from *näftänna* and *balabats* loyal to the Ethiopian Empire (Braukämper, 2011: 166-169). Sidaama peasants were positive towards the Italian occupants. The Italians abolished slavery and the tenant system and redistributed land to peasants (Sbacchi, 1985: 157-161; Tolo, 1998: 120-124; Braukämper, 2011: 173-174).

Following the Italian conquest, the invaders expelled foreign missionaries, and between 1937 and 1938, most foreign missions had left Ethiopia. The SIM missionaries in Sidaama left their mission stations (Lass-Westphal, 1972: 98-100). The Catholic Capuchins were a French mission organisation and became replaced by members of the pro-Italian Pontificio Istituto Missioni Estere (PIME/Pontifical Institute of Foreign Mission). The PIME mission operated in Sidaama between 1937 and 1941 (Antonius Alberto, 2013: 236, 239-240). Statistical data about the province "Galla e Sidamo" show that the Italian population consisted mainly of men. The Catholic mission probably attended to Italian soldiers and civilian Italians working in public administration (Luca Podesta, 2011: 30-36; Braukämper, 2011: 176). Later sources indicate conversions of local people to the Catholic faith during the years of occupation (McClellan, 1998: 186). As part of a political strategy to destabilise the Ethiopian Empire, the Italian invaders favoured Islam in Southern Ethiopia (Sbacchi, 1985:161-162), and there may have been a presence of Islam in Sidaama during the few years of Italian occupation since Italian occupiers recruited native soldiers from Muslim groups (Braukämper, 2011: 177).

1941: Restoration of the Ethiopian Empire and the establishment of foreign missions in Sidaama

In 1941, the Italian occupation ended. The Ethiopian Empire became restored. In Southern Ethiopia, there was a period of instability until 1943, and indigenous groups mobilised against the Ethiopian imperial state (Perham, 1969: 362). In the Sidaama area, local leaders Yetera Bole and Hushula Tadiso led a resistance movement (Tolo, 1998: 122-123). By 1944, the Ethiopian state regained power, and Emperor Haile Selassie initiated a pragmatic policy. The government gave amnesty and restored state institutions. In 1941, the Ethiopian government abolished the tenant system. In Southern Ethiopia, landlords and *balabats* reestablished their positions, but a new system of land distribution created new socioeconomic inequalities (Braukämper, 2011: 178-179).

Following the restoration, Emperor Haile Selassie promoted political visions for modernisation. New relations developed between the Ethiopian state and religious institutions following the post-restoration period. In this context, foreign organisations became invited to participate in activities to develop and modernise Ethiopia, such as education and medical facilities. In 1944, relations between the Ethiopian government and foreign missionary societies became formalised by a mission decree. Foreign missions were invited to conduct activities related to health and education and allowed to work in "open areas", i. e. regions of Ethiopia that were predominantly non-Orthodox (Trimingham, 1950: 46-47, 68-71; Perham, 1969: 133-135). Emperor Haile Selassie likely wished to balance the religious-political power of the EOTC (Clapham, 1969: 82-86). The restoration had renewed the powerful position of the EOTC. This position influenced the church's relations with foreign missions in local settings (Perham, 1969: 126-128, 133-136). In Southern Ethiopia, this created competition between Christian groups since the EOTC conducted mission campaigns and performed mass baptisms of local populations (Braukämper, 1980: 380-381).

The Sidaama area was an "open area" according to the mission decree of 1944. The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) reestablished contact with local groups at a meeting in Soddo, Wolayta, in 1943. During the six-year absence of the SIM missionaries, the lay groups had organised work through an active local agency. After the restoration, SIM reestablished mission work in Sidaama. In 1946-1947, the SIM returned to Homacho and Alatta Wondo, assisted by evangelists from Wolayta (Fargher, 1996: 223-224, 254-255, 295; Tolo, 1998: 118-119). In 1948 and 1949, the Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM) started working in the Sidaama area (Tolo, 1998: 145). They were assisted by local evangelists with background from SIM, from Sidaama, Kambata-Hadiya and Wolayta (Tolo, 1998: 145, 150-151, 156-157, 193-194; Balisky, 2009: 238-239). Both the SIM and NLM missions started stations with schools and clinics.[2]

Establishing missions in the same geographical area created competition between SIM and NLM. The organisations resolved the tension by a comity agreement that delimited the work areas of the missions in Sidaama. The organisations agreed not to receive members from each other's communities if they already were baptised by SIM or NLM[3] (Aasebø-Rønne 1997: 43-44, 51). On the other hand, the comity agreement did not impact the religious conversion process to Christianity. In practice, there was mobility between groups, and the local Sidaama converts did not always follow the doctrinal differences set by the missionaries (Balisky, 2009: 243). One reason was that indigenous evangelists acted independently. In addition, from the

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[2] SIM started a school at Alatta Wondo in 1947, which became a Bible school in 1950 (Balisky, 2009: 233, 236-239). NLM started a school at Yrga Alem and Dilla in 1949, a Bible school in Dilla in 1952, a teacher training school in Yrga Alem in 1950, a clinic/hospital 1949/1950, a station at Bansa in 1952-53 and Hagere Selam in 1954 (Tolo, 1998: 154-155,159).

[3] SIM practised believer's baptism, while NLM practised infant baptism.

1950s and onwards, additional foreign missions established mission activities that attracted Christian converts and created denominational diversity: the Seventh-day Adventist Mission (1956), the Swedish Philadelphia Church Mission (1960), the Catholic Comboni Mission (1962), the Finnish Free Foreign Mission (1965/66), and the United Pentecostal Mission (1971)[4]

Missions, modernity and religious conversion in Sidaama

The establishment of educational facilities and schools was a premise set by the Ethiopian government in the 1944 mission decree. Consequently, education became part of the strategy of Christian missions. Primary education focused on developing reading and writing skills combined with religious instruction, while more advanced training focused on educating indigenous teachers who could work as teachers and evangelists. The educators were supposed to provide education in the national language, Amharic. After 1941, part of the political centralisation policy of Emperor Haile Selassie was the expansive use of Amharic both for instructions in schools and bureaucracy (Bahru Zewde, 2004: 311-312).

In the Sidaama area, the first mission schools established by SIM and NLM were in towns in the coffee production areas, such as Yrga Alem and Alatta Wondo. In addition, there were also numerous outstation schools where indigenous evangelists provided education in local rural communities. The mission schools mainly attracted younger people, especially young men and girls (Tolo, 1998; Balisky, 2009).

It is possible to compare this development in the Sidaama area with other Southern Ethiopian contexts. Donald Donham has suggested how "vernacular modernisms" developed through the encounters between mission Christianity and Christian converts during the pre-revolutionary period. Converts experienced modernity through education and health practices and perceived indigenous institutions and practices as hindering progress (Donham 1999, xviii).

In Sidaama, access to education was a means for improving social and economic status. For a younger generation, education allowed circumventing structural sources of power and status in Sidaama society. One reason was that the social organisation contained inherent tensions between younger and older people. Elders controlled land and cattle, which provided the basis for status, while younger people had a subordinate position. Social and economic changes in post-restoration Ethiopia, especially new coffee production activities, led to changing generational relations. Anthropological research observed the development of new workgroups, "voluntary associations" (Hamer, 1967: 78-79). The changes in work organisation, e.g., by wage labour and cash cropping, combined with access to education, challenged the division of labour between older and younger men and created new social categories, e.g., educated-uneducated workers and farmers, thereby marking gaps between generations (Hamer, 1994: 189; Hamer, 2002: 606,608-610).

Inter-religious relations and religious conversion

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[4] The Swedish Philadelphia Church Mission (SPCM), later became the Ethiopian Hiwot Berhan Church, started activities in Awasa (1960), Melge Wondo (1963) and Worancha (1962-63). The Finnish Free Foreign Mission later became part of the Ethiopian Guenet Church. In 1964, the Roman Catholic Church reestablished a mission in Awasa and later expanded through mission stations, schools and clinics to Tullu, Fullasa, Shaffina, Dongora and Tetichcha. The activities of the United Pentecostal Mission developed into the Apostolic Church of Ethiopia.

The integration into the political and economic system of the Ethiopian state challenged indigenous Sidaama religious practices. One main reason was the close connection between ancestor veneration, spirit possession, the authority of the clan system, kin groups and spiritual dependency through social obligations and offerings. The weakened roles of these institutions influenced religious conversion. Missionaries and their indigenous intermediaries also reinterpreted religious practices and concepts from indigenous Sidaama religious practices. One example is the name for God, *Maganu*, a traditional Sidaama creator and sky God, who attained the role of God in the Christian context. A set of Sidaama moral values, named *halaale* (in Sidaamu Afoo). These values centred on the balanced relationship between humans, the community and the creator God. Such values did not conflict with Christianity and allowed pragmatic reinterpretation by converts (Hamer & Hamer, 1966: 399; Brøgger, 1986: 70-71; Hamer, 2002: 607-609).

The religious conversion to the SIM and NLM missions probably responded to the religious environment. Conversion narratives from converts to the mission of SIM and NLM show that the early converts experienced opposition both from adherents to Sidaama ethno-religious practices as well as from settlers who were members of EOTC (Tolo, 1998:177-179; Balisky, 2009: 235-241). For example, the EOTC became associated with the Ethiopian imperial system. Many early converts lived in the coffee production areas like Alatta Wondo, with a higher density of settlers. In these areas, the EOTC had attempted to organise baptisms in 1943 and 1944 (Tolo, 1998:124). The new system of land distribution implemented in post-1941 increased the resentment towards the feudal economic system and created social tensions between settlers and indigenous Sidaama. In the neighbouring Gedeo zone, a coffee production area, there were peasant uprisings in 1960 and 1968 (McClellan, 1986: 189; Tolo, 1998: 272-274).

Becoming *yesuus-manna*: Christian personhood and gender roles

Through education at mission schools, converts became part of a new form of community. Converts adopted new religious practices and ideas, contributing to a category of personhood named *yesuus-manna* (in Sidaamu Afoo), or "Jesus-people". Being a member of emerging Christian groups shaped notions about what it meant to be a social person and provided alternative moral norms and constructions of gender roles.

The traditional mode of marital relations in Sidaama was closely related to agricultural production and clan organisation. Traditionally, youth became betrothed at a young age, but it was first when the woman bore children that family groups exchanged bridewealth. Marriage was a relationship that could be changed or terminated. The emergence of the cash economy influenced gender relations and provided aspirations related to modernisation, such as education or membership in the community (Hamer & Hamer, 1994: 188-189, 191-192, 194-195). Education at mission schools and membership in Christian congregations provided an alternative setting for marital relations. Change of marital relations was also part of the mission strategy. The missionaries became confronted with polygamy practices that they considered unmodern and morally inferior and therefore attempted to change marriage practices. From the missionaries' point of view, marriage was a monogamous marriage based on a life-long contract between man and woman and blessed by God. The education at mission schools also focused on transforming the home to reorder society. In this setting, women were influential, especially in mission work directed towards the younger woman. Some female converts became Bible women and engaged in evangelism and organisational work, and they also gained skills for purposes other than the missionary teachers intended, i.e., in entrepreneurial activities (Tolo, 1998: 160-161, 184-185).

Although conversion and membership in the emerging Christian community provided discontinuity with traditional practices, the early Christian converts also reproduced gender

roles based on the ideology of the male as the head of the family. The emerging Christian communities also reproduced hierarchical relations. For example, the churches established by missions replicated traditional leadership patterns. The Christian congregations reproduced patriarchal structures and became organised with male leadership. In addition, the Christian congregations also developed new distinctions based on educated personnel and laity (Bakke, 1987: 129-130).

Membership in a new community and national Churches

Membership in Christian communities and the organisation of congregations created a sense of agency and denominational identity. In 1956-1961, the importance of the agency of indigenous Christian evangelists became evident when the local government in Sidaama forbade foreign missionaries from conducting activities outside of mission stations. Then, indigenous evangelists became responsible for the mission activities, and the consequence was an expansion of groups that adhered to SIM and NLM (Fargher, 1996: 296; Tolo, 1998: 179-180, 196-198, 223; Balisky, 2009: 240). The exact statistics of the churches established during the 1950s and 1960s are not precisely known, but the number of Christians was small compared to the overall population in the zone. Numbers given for the churches related to SIM/ Kale Heywot only indicate the number of congregations (Cotterell, 1983: 20). Numbers provided for the South Ethiopian Synod (which included a wider area than Sidaama) indicate 82718 in 1975 and 235539 in 1984 (Bakke, 1987: 186). Although these Christian communities were a religious minority before the Ethiopian revolution in 1974, the early converts developed a denominational identity and sense of being integrated into national and global churches. Two factors influenced this denominational identity. One was the organisation of national churches. The other reason was the foundation of new Christian missions, which diversified theological perspectives and worship practices.

From 1944 onwards, there were attempts to form a united evangelical church in Ethiopia through the Conference of Ethiopian Evangelical Churches (CEEC). Still, the initiative failed and resulted in the development of separate denominations at a national level. In 1959, the NLM-related groups in Sidaama became members of the Evangelical Mekane Yesus Church (ECMY) (Tolo, 1998: 216-217)[5] A regional synod, the South Ethiopia Synod (which included both Sidaama and Gamo Gofa), was established in the same year. In 1971, the SIM-related groups became formal members of Kale Heywot Church (Fargher, 1996: 301). From the 1960s, the Protestant churches in Ethiopia became increasingly influenced by the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement (Fargher, 1996: 344-345; Haustein, 2011: 14-15), resulting in new independent churches, such as Mulu Wongel and the Apostolic Church of Ethiopia, and related to doctrinal discourses such as worship styles or the introduction alternative theological interpretations. Before the Ethiopian revolution in 1974, there was an increase in new missions in Sidaama, which created opportunity situations motivating conversions and new settings for religious competition between different Christian groups and new independent churches.

Conclusion

The conversion to mission Christianity occurred at the intersection between indigenous Sidaama religious practices, the Ethiopian state and foreign missions. The incorporation into the Empire Ethiopian Empire created a political distortion of the indigenous system of power in Sidaama. Post-restoration Ethiopia and the establishment of foreign missions offered people access to modern resources, especially education, which entailed possibilities for wage labour and new sources of power. In this context, groups of Sidaama favoured conversion to mission

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[5] Between 1969 and 1979, it was named *ECMY (Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in Ethiopia)*. Since 1979, *Ethiopian* was added to the name, thus EECMY.

Christianity (Protestant and Catholic) rather than an adaption of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, which was associated with the power of the Ethiopian Empire.

Conversion to mission Christianity is closely related to introducing modern resources that helped converts manage tensions and inequalities in Sidaama society. The first converts were younger men and women. As such, conversion addressed tensions related to gender and generation. Although there were tensions between converts and indigenous Sidaama religious practices, there was also accommodation with the basic indigenous norm system of Sidaama morals and ethics. As such, Christianity offered alternative socially embedded paths that challenged important parts of Sidaama society and introduced an alternative approach with direct personal and individual access to the divine. The converts became socialised into new networks and a community, which created a sense of self-awareness and identity as a group beyond kinship relations and was essential for social mobility. Some early converts became agents of change, working as educated personnel in churches and congregations. Membership in a new community provided an alternative to the Sidaama ancestor cult, where seniors controlled mediation with the divine. On the other, the new communities of Christians became diversified by the influx of new Christian missions and created internal differences regarding theological doctrines and worship practices.

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