ETHINICIZATION OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN EOTC: THE CASE OF 'WELISO TOWN' IN OROMIA NATIONAL REGIONAL STATE

Mesfin Abate

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የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን ለዚህ ሀገር ከዋለቻቸው ታላላቅ ውለታዎች አንዱና ዋነኛው የሀገሪቱ የአንድነት ጎይል ወይም ምሰሶ ሆና ለዘመናት መቆየቷ ነው። ነገር ግን አሁን አሁን ይህ ታላቅ አስተዋፅአ በሀይማኖት ብሔርተኝነት ሳቢያ ፈተና ላይ እየወደቀ ነው። በዚህም ሀገሪቱም ቤተ ክርስቲያኗም አደጋ ውስጥ ገብተዋል። ቤተ ክርስቲያኗ ከአማራ እና ትግራይ ብሔሮች ጋር ታሪካዊ ትስስርና ዝምድና አላት በሚል ግንዛቤ የአስተዳደር ፖለቲካዊ ጫናው በርትቶባታል። በአሁኑ ጊዜ አንዳንድ ፖለቲከኞች/ቡድኖች ቤተ ክርስቲያንን አምርረው የሚተቹትና የሚቃወሙት ከዚሁ ከተቀናቃኝ ብሔሮች ጋር አላት ከሚባለው ታሪካዊ ግንኙነትና ዝምድና በመነሳት ነው። በርግጥ የሀይማኖት ብሔርተኝነት ግጭት ታሪካዊ፣ ባህላዊ፣ ፖለቲካዊ እና/ወይም ኢኮኖሚያዊ በሆኑ ምክንያቶችና ተፅዕኖዎች አማካይነት ሊከሰት ይችላል። የዚህ ጥናት ዋና ዓላማ በኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን (በተለይም በወሊሶ ከተማ) የሀይማኖት ብሔርተኝነት ግጭትን ምንነት፣ ሰበብ እና ተዋናይ አካላት መለየትና መመርመር ነው። ጥናቱ ገላጭ የምርምር ዘዴን የተጠቀመ ሲሆን፣ መረጃዎች ከአሥራ ሁለት ቁልፍ መረጃ ሰጪዎች ተሰብስበዋል። ለመረጃ ሰጭነት ከተመረጡት መካከል የከተማው ከፍተኛ አስተዳደር ባለሥልጣናት፣ የፖሊስ አባላት እና የኅብረተሰብ መሪዎችን ይጠቀሳሉ። የሰነድ ፍተሻ፣ ቃለ መጠይቅ እና ምልከታ የጥናቱ የመረጃ መሰብሰቢያ ዘዴዎች ናቸው። በጥናቱ ግኝት እንደተመለከተውና በመፍትሔ ሐሳብ ክፍል እንደተጠቆመው፣ ቤተ ክርስቲያን ይህንን የተሳሳተ ትርክት ለማረምና ለማስተካከል ተገቢ የግንዛቤ ትምህርት በመስጠትና ከልዩ ልዩ የፖለቲካ መሪዎችና ቡድኖች እንዲሁም ልዩ ልዩ ጎሳ ካላቸው የእምነቱ ተከታዮች ጋር ውይይት በማድረግ ችግሮችን መፍታትና የወደፊት ሕልውናዋን ማረጋገጥ ይገባታል።

ቁልፍ ቃላቶች - የሃማኖት ብሄርተኝነት፣ ፖለቲካ፣ የጎሳ ቡድን፣

Background

Politics infiltrates every facet of existence globally, entwining even spiritual realms, particularly evident in the intricate dynamics between religions, individuals, and states (David and Ejiro, 2023). Historical precedents, such as the 17th-century schism within Orthodox Christianity, underscore how political disputes can fracture religious communities, as seen in the divergence between the "Old Believers" and the Russian Orthodox Church (Nwagwu, 2021). What initially stemmed from disagreements over religious rituals escalated into a broader challenge to the prevailing social order, revealing the intersectionality of political and religious dissent? Moreover, ethno-religious conflicts, marked by violence and discord, pose significant threats to national security, fostering fear, division, and upheaval within societies (Salawu, 2010).

Ethno-religious conflicts in post-colonial Africa present a formidable challenge, differing from past interstate disputes. These conflicts manifest internally, dividing societies horizontally and vertically, fueling tensions between marginalized groups and central authorities (Rukuni & Oliver, 2019). With approximately 4.5 million refugees, including vulnerable demographics like women and children, Africa grapples with the dire consequences of such conflicts (Cimbalo, 2023). Rooted in historical legacies of colonialism and the Cold War, these conflicts primarily stem from governance failures, the politicization of identities, and power struggles driven by narrow ideologies (Gauthier, 2022).

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) experienced controversy when Patriarch Abuna Merkorios was removed from office under questionable circumstances. His supporters argue that it was due to pressure from the government, while critics suggest he willingly stepped down in response to protests. Despite his efforts to regain his position, the Holy Synod rejected him, resulting in the election of Abune Paulos in 1992 and the subsequent exile of Abuna Merkorios (Ostebo et al., 2021).

Religious conflict resolution bodies, traditional and nontraditional, explore resolution within religious organizations (Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 2021). Combining religious teachings with conflict resolution techniques promotes peace building. Assessing the role of religious organizations in peaceful co-existence involves examining Holy Scriptures and social capital (Ethiopia Zare , 2019). This study focuses on intragroup disputes among priests within the Churches. The study tries to investigate religious intolerance, namely an intergroup conflict avoidance in EOTC based on some selected theories.

Statement of the problem

The study of the ethnicization of religious conflict within the Church (EOTC), particularly in regions like Oromia, remains an underexplored area. Despite extensive research on religious conflicts in Ethiopia, few studies have delved into the intersection of ethnicity and religion, especially within the EOTC context (Orthodoxy & Yohannes, 2023). This gap is notable given the intricate interplay between religion and ethnicity in Ethiopia, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of how these factors influence conflict dynamics. Moreover, existing research often overlooks the experiences and perspectives of Orthodox Christians, particularly those residing in regions like Weliso, Oromia. While studies predominantly focus on religious minorities, exploring the perspectives of the Orthodox Christian majority can offer valuable insights into the ethnicization of religious conflicts (Molla Ademe, 2021). Addressing this research gap is vital for developing inclusive conflict resolution strategies that consider the perspectives of all religious and ethnic groups within Ethiopia, promoting greater interfaith and interethnic understanding.

However, the ethnicization of religious conflicts within the EOTC, particularly in towns like Weliso, poses significant challenges to social cohesion and stability. Despite the EOTC's teachings promoting unity, the infiltration of ethnic divisions has led to escalating tensions and conflicts within the community. The situation is further complicated by the exploitation of ethnicity and religion by certain

groups for political gain, exacerbating insecurity and threatening nascent democratic processes (Ostebo et al, 2021). In recent developments, for instance, in 22 January, 2023 the unauthorized ordination of bishops and subsequent crisis within the EOTC, highlight the urgent need to address these underlying issues of ethnic and religious tensions (Ademe & Ali, 2023). This research, therefore, addresses the existing awareness gap of social conflict happened by ethnicization of religion in Ethiopia, particularly in Weliso town.

Objective of the study

The general objective of the study is to examine ethinicization of religious conflicts in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church, the case of Oromia National Regional State in 'Weliso' town. From this general objective, the study has the following specific objectives:

- Explore how leadership decision and communication strategies influence the dynamics of ethnicity and religious tension within the study area.

- Examine the cause of conflict in the study area.

- Investigate the actors in ethinicization of religious conflict in the study area.

Scope of the study

This study focuses on the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Weliso town, where raids by a group calling themselves the "Holy Synod of Oromia" led by "Abba Sawiros" and government Special Forces support have caused violence. Conflict within the Orthodox Church has escalated in Oromia, with government involvement heightening tensions.

Geographically limited to Weliso, this research examines the emergence of ethnicized religious conflicts within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, marking Weliso as a pivotal location for such tensions within the South West Shoa Zone.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Theory plays a crucial role in enhancing the understanding and analysis of literary works by providing various frameworks and perspectives for interpreting texts. The social-conflict approach to religion highlights how religion, as a phenomenon of human behavior, maintains social inequality by advancing a worldview that justifies oppression. According to Karl Marx, i.e. social-conflict approach, in a capitalist society, religion plays a critical role in maintaining an unequal status quo, and it has been a tool of social control in which certain groups of people have radically more resources and power than other groups of people (Marta, 2000).

Emile Durkheim, one of the advocates of structural-functional approach to religion, argued that religion is, in a sense, the celebration and even (self-) worship of human society. He proposed that religion has three major functions in society: it provides social cohesion to help maintain social solidarity through shared rituals and beliefs, social control to enforce religious-based morals and norms to help maintain conformity and control in society, and it offers meaning and purpose to answer any existential questions (in Cahyo, 2015).

Ethnic conflict, a form of conflict in which the objectives of at least one party are defined in ethnic terms, and the conflict, its antecedents, and possible solutions are perceived along ethnic lines. The conflict is usually not about ethnic differences themselves but over political, economic, social, cultural, or territorial matters (Fox, 2007). Ethnic conflict is one of the major threats to international peace and security. Conflict is inherent in human interactions, arises from incompatible beliefs or behaviors, categorized as intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, or organizational (Nwagwu, 2021).

Conflict theory provides insights into the structural inequalities and power dynamics that shape society. Conflict arises from the unequal distribution of power, resources, and social status. Those in positions of power use their influence to maintain their advantages. Conflict theory identifies several key causes of conflict within society.

Firstly, social structures and institutions play a significant role in the perpetuation of conflict. The struggle for access to limited resources, termed as contested resources in conflict theory, results in competition and conflict among different social groups and classes. Weber, on the other hand, expanded conflict theory to include power struggles that extend beyond economic class. He looked at how power dynamics are influenced by various social identities such as race, gender, and social status. It offers a lens through which to examine and address the root causes of conflict, paving the way for a more equitable and just society.

Similarly, Social Identity Theory, In-groups are a critical source of pride and self-esteem, and therefore beliefs, behaviors, actions, and characteristics of the in-group are favored, while out-group members are negatively judged (Turner, 1975). In many cases, "in-group" favoritism is followed by negative "out-group" derogation, bias, hostility, stereotypes, and prejudice. Personal behavior can become hostile, aggressive, and violent when competition or perceived threats exist between groups. Intergroup conflict can also occur when resources are scarce, leading to behavior that is manipulative or harsh This refers to the tendency of people to classify themselves and others into various social groups based on attributes like race, gender, nationality, or religion.

Henri Tajfel (2010) explains how group memberships shape individual identities and contribute to intergroup conflicts, providing a useful lens for understanding the dynamics of ethnic and religious conflicts within the EOTC. Together, these theories facilitate a deeper analysis of the underlying factors perpetuating conflicts within this religious institution.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research seeks to understand social phenomena from the perspective of those experiencing them. It involves collecting non-numerical data such as interviews, observations, and written documents to gain insights into human experiences, attitudes, and

behaviors. Sampling techniques are a critical component of qualitative research as it involves selecting a group of participants who can provide valuable insights into the research questions.

Regarding the research design, this study applied a descriptive research design. According to Kothari (2004), a research design provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data. It helps to identify and address the problem that may rise during the process of research and analysis.

The main aim of descriptive research is to provide an accurate and valid representation of (encapsulate) the factors or variables that pertain are relevant to the research question, such research involves gathering data that describe events and then organizes, tabulates, depicts, and describes the data collection (Glass & Hopkins,1984).

To gather the necessary data, 12 key informants were chosen for participation in this research. Purposive sampling was employed to select these key inform ants, as they were believed to possess ample information relevant to the issues being studied.

Findings

Generally, three of the church bishops in Weliso Town identified as key informants argue that instances or patterns of conflict among the leaders of the local churches can be multifaceted in nature. These conflicts can stem from a variety of factors. These factors include differing interpretations of religious teachings and doctrines. The church leaders may hold divergent views on the proper interpretation and application of core theological principles, leading to disagreements and tensions. Another possible factor is competition for leadership roles and authority: There may be power struggles and rivalries among the bishops, and other senior clergy as they vie for influential positions within the church hierarchy. Still a possible reason is disagreements over the allocation and management of church resources: The other factor, according to the interviewees, is underlying ethnic or tribal

tensions: In some cases, the conflicts among church leaders may have roots in deeper societal divisions based on ethnicity, tribal affiliations, or other identity-based factors within the local community.

The combination of these diverse factors - theological, administrative, financial, and socio-cultural - can contribute to the multifaceted nature of the conflicts observed among the church leadership in Weliso Town, according to the three bishops who were interviewed on Monday, March 4, 2024.

The senior managers of the town administration and community leaders have expressed that conflicts may arise at times due to the overlap of ethnicity and religion. The Church holds great cultural and historical significance, deeply intertwined with the nation's identity. As a result, differences in religious practices or beliefs may sometimes be politicized or lead to tensions, especially in regions with diverse ethnic and religious populations.

During my interview, the police officer, who was a key informant, stated that the crisis began on January 22, 2023. At that time, three bishops, led by Abuna Sawiros, ordained 26 episcopates in Weliso town, Oromia, without the permission of the Addis Ababa-based Holy Synod. They went on to establish what they called the Holy Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities. Abuna Sawiros justified this action by stressing the importance of appointing spiritual leaders who were well-versed in the culture and language of churches in Oromia and other regions. He argued that the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church's habit of appointing spiritual leaders primarily from the Amhara region had driven followers away from the church. (Date of interview: Monday, 04-March-2024)

The key informants all reached a similar conclusion that, following the unauthorized ordination, the Holy Synod deemed it unlawful and proceeded to excommunicate the three archbishops and 25 newly appointed episcopates. In retaliation, the newly formed synod excommunicated twelve archbishops from the Holy Synod. The conflict escalated as the new synod appointed bishops in

various dioceses in Oromia and the Southern Nations region, leading to aggressive takeovers of churches. Reports indicated that government forces, including the Oromia Special Forces, supported these takeovers (Date of interview: Monday, March 4, 2024).

According to police officers, violent clashes occurred between supporters of the new synod and followers of the traditional Holy Synod. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission documented cases of excessive force by government security forces during these confrontations in Shashemene on February 11, 2023, leading to at least eight deaths and numerous injuries. Some individuals working with the security forces were also involved in the violence. Key informants reported that an agreement was reached between the two Synods on February 15, 2023, temporarily reuniting the Church. However, tensions arising from ethnic and religious disparities persist. This internal conflict within the EOTC highlights enduring ethnic rivalries and power struggles, particularly between the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups, which are the largest in Ethiopia. The call for cultural and linguistic representation within the church has further widened this gap (Interview conducted on Monday, March 4, 2024).

The Church bishops said that they knew about the individual problems that had arisen in the study area. This division has led to the creation of parallel hierarchies within the Church. One group, the indigenous Holy Synod headquartered in Addis Ababa, is in opposition to the newly established Holy Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities. Each synod asserts its legitimacy and maintains its own clergy members, including bishops, priests, and deacons. This fragmentation has disrupted the established hierarchical structure of the EOTC, particularly in terms of leadership appointments. The ordination of bishops by the new synod without approval from the central Holy Synod has challenged the existing leadership framework, highlighting the underlying tension between centralized authority, represented by the Addis Ababa-based Holy Synod, and the advocacy for localized leadership brought forth by the new synod (Date of interview: Thursday, 07-March-2024).

According to the bishops and community leaders, the conflict in the region is deeply intertwined with issues of ethnic and linguistic representation. The newly established synod has underscored the importance of having bishops who possess an understanding of local cultures and languages, reflecting the broader societal tensions between the historically dominant Amhara ethnic group, associated with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), and the Oromo, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group. The disputes extend to the ownership of church properties, with both synods claiming control over churches, monasteries, and religious sites. Confrontations arise when one faction attempts to assert control over a church previously under the jurisdiction of the opposing synod. Discrepancies in religious practices and liturgy have also surfaced, with the new synod advocating for worship and liturgical practices tailored to local contexts. This conflict reflects wider debates within the EOTC regarding the preservation of traditional practices versus adaptation to local circumstances.

The involvement of government forces, such as the Oromia Special Forces, in supporting church takeovers introduces a political dimension, raising questions about the government's role in mediating or exacerbating the conflict. The interview with the bishops and community leaders was conducted on Thursday, 07 March 2024.

According to the senior manager of the town administration and the insights of police officers' participants regarding the question at hand, historical conflicts within religious establishments have often been fueled by theological disputes. In the context of the EOTC, differences in interpreting religious scriptures, liturgical practices, and doctrines may contribute to tensions. However, while theological variations play a role, they do not seem to be the main cause of the recent schism. Instead, the focus has shifted towards administrative and ethnic factors. Key issues include leadership appointments, control of church assets, and jurisdictional matters. An example of an administrative challenge is the unauthorized ordination of bishops by the new synod in Weliso Town, conducted

without approval from the central Holy Synod. This act disrupted the established hierarchy and triggered the current crisis. The conflict mainly centers around the debate between local and centralized leadership, emphasizing administrative concerns that have escalated the situation (Interview conducted on Thursday, 07 March 2024).

Ethnic dynamics wield significant influence over the conflict, evidenced by the following factors: Amhara-Oromo Rivalry: Ethiopia's intricate ethnic makeup extends to the EOTC, with longstanding rivalries between the Amhara and Oromo groups. Their representation within the church has sparked contention. Localization vs. Centralization: The new synod's prioritization of bishops versed in local cultures and languages, particularly in Oromia, reflects a push for ethnic inclusivity. This aligns with broader calls for decentralization and acknowledgment of regional identities. Power Struggles: The conflict entails power struggles rooted in ethnicity. The established leadership often linked to the Amhara region, clashes with the new synod's vision of embracing inclusivity and local empowerment. Violence in Shashemene which caused clashes among adherents of the two Synods in Shashemene underscore how ethnic tensions can escalate into violent confrontations (Date of interview on Thursday, 07-March-2024).

Community leaders and respondents from the Church bishop argued that the conflict began when three archbishops ordained 26 episcopates in Waliso town, Oromia, without the consent of the Addis Ababa-based Holy Synod. They established the Holy Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities with the goal of appointing spiritual leaders who were familiar with local cultures and languages to counterbalance what they perceived as the dominance of Amhara-appointed spiritual leaders. This led to tensions and clashes between supporters of the new synod and the traditional Holy Synod. Following this, the Holy Synod declared the ordainment illegal, resulting in the excommunication of the three archbishops and 25 newly ordained episcopates. In response, the new synod excommunicated twelve archbishops from the Holy Synod and proceeded to

appoint its own bishops in dioceses across Oromia and the Southern Nations region. The situation further escalated with reports of militant church takeovers, allegedly supported by government forces (Date of interview: Monday, 11th March 2024).

Senior officials of the town administration and police officers stated that a clash between supporters of the two Synods in Shashemene on Feb. 11, 2023, resulted in loss of lives and injuries, with eight fatalities reported by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. The involvement of government security forces raised concerns about rights violations. The agreement reached on February 15 temporarily unified the church. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed described the issue as internal and called for discussions. Besides, aside from the internal conflict, many natives of Tigray primarily support the Holy Church group, emphasizing the need for resolution within the Holy Church. The ongoing activities and conflicts within the church are negatively impacting the Northern Church and could potentially have wider implications for Ethiopia. (Interview held on Monday, March 11, 2024)

Throughout its history, church bishops and community leaders have argued, the church has wielded a significant influence in Ethiopia, profoundly shaping the nation's identity. Its role in fostering a shared Christian identity played a crucial part in unifying the kingdom. Nonetheless, the Church faced challenges over time, especially regarding its organizational structure and interactions with secular authorities. The nationalization of the Ethiopian Church presented a major obstacle in the early 20th century, marked by the imprisonment and execution of a Patriarch by the Derg regime, resulting in changes in the upper clergy. Subsequently, the EPRDF regime detained the Derg's Patriarch, paving the way for new leadership aligned with secular powers. These government interventions sparked reform movements within the Church, drawing conservative opposition. Abuna Tewofilos, the acting patriarch during Haile Selassie's reign, offered differing perspectives on the Church's relationship with the state, emphasizing their interdependent roles by stating the inseparability of the Church from the

state and vice versa (Date of interview on Monday-11-March-2024).

Three bishops of the church advocated for and asserted its independence by severing ties with the Egyptian Coptic Church, thus affirming its autocephaly. Over the years, the Church has adapted to political changes in Ethiopia, sometimes aligning with or opposing the ruling regime. At present, the church faces internal and external obstacles, including attempts to weaken its influence and mission. However, despite these challenges, the EOTC remains a crucial national institution in Ethiopia.

Senior managers from the town administration alongside police officers shared that the Church embodies not only a place of worship but also symbolizes Ethiopian heritage and national identity. There is a disagreement regarding who should supervise the church: The Ethiopian government, the Amhara community, or the Oromo community. Each of these groups has a distinct historical relationship with the Church. Furthermore, the differing languages used in worship add another layer of complexity. Should services be conducted in Geez, Amharic, Tigrinya, or English? This linguistic diversity mirrors Ethiopia's rich cultural tapestry. Given Ethiopia's diverse ethnic makeup, it is beneficial for the Church to offer services in the language that resonates with the community, addressing the people's needs effectively. The government, as representatives of the people, should collaborate with the Church when challenges arise, seeking support and promoting religious equality in Ethiopia. The establishment of a separate Synod in Oromia presents a challenge to the authority of the Holy Synod, sparking a power struggle and bringing into question the appropriateness of certain roles within the Church. (Date of interview: Monday, 11th March 2024)

Ethiopia's Federal arrangement organizes the nation into ethnically delineated regions, each with its own legislative body and specialized security forces, influencing religious dynamics significantly. At times, ethnic allegiance takes precedence over religious solidarity, leading to internal divisions within the Church. The church has weathered periods of persecution, external influences,

and resilience throughout its history, with leaders interpreting contemporary conflicts through the prism of historical trauma, thus shaping their responses. Identity politics, particularly where ethnicity intersects with religion, becomes a catalyst for tensions' (Date of interview on Monday-11- March, -2024).

The bishops of the churches and the senior management of the town administration argued that disparities in liturgical practices and theological interpretations are intensifying conflicts within the EOTC. Some ethnic groups prioritize specific traditions, while others push for reform, blending doctrinal disagreements with ethnic identity. The recent legal victory of the Holy Synod in preventing a breakaway synod from using Church assets highlights the struggle for authority. However, implementing decisions across federal states organized along ethnic and linguistic lines presents significant challenges. Inter-generational differences are evident, with younger groups emphasizing relevance, inclusivity, and flexibility, in contrast to older leaders who are attached to tradition and resistant to change. These differences in generations affect conflict resolution approaches. Essentially, the ethnicization of religious disagreements within the EOTC in Weliso Town arises from a complex interplay of historical legacies, political dynamics, linguistic subtleties, and cultural complexities (Date of interview: Monday, March 11, 2024).

The key informants of the community leaders pointed out through historical events that Ethiopia's history has been shaped by European colonization efforts, influencing ethnic identities, territorial boundaries, and power structures. Additionally , key historical events like Ethiopia's adoption of Christianity in the 4th century established the Church as a central institution. These historical influences continue to play a significant role in shaping modern conflicts within the nation (Interview conducted on Monday, March 11, 2024).

The church bishops explained cultural dynamics. They emphasized the significant role culture plays in shaping ethnic identity by encompassing language, traditions, rituals, and shared historical narratives, all of which contribute to group solidarity.

Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" illustrates how cultural symbols and narratives create a sense of belonging among ethnic groups. Examples like the "foulard affair" in France highlight how clothing choices, such as headscarves, can become powerful symbols of identity, leading to heated debates and conflicts (Date of interview on Monday-11-March-2024).

The bishops also noted that the relationship between the church and the Ethiopian government has evolved over time. Political leaders hold sway over church matters, affecting decision-making processes, appointments, and overall governance. Ethiopia's federal system divides the country into regions based on ethnicity, impacting religious institutions like the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) due to decentralization. As a result, power struggles within the political sphere overlap with challenges faced by religious leadership. Different factions often vie for control over the Church, resulting in conflicts.

The respondents argue that the ethnicization of religion leads to a prioritization of ethnic identity over religious solidarity. Leaders emphasize ethnic pride, potentially creating divisions within the EOTC. Conflicts often arise over Church properties as ethnic territories intersect with religious areas, reflecting broader ethnic tensions. Leaders exploit these issues to garner support by capitalizing on deep-seated fears about the endangerment of both ethnic and religious identities. (Date of interview: Monday, March 11, 2024)

Senior managers of the town administration, police officers, and community leaders collectively engage in disputes over the appointment of bishops, metropolitans, and patriarchs, often sparking power struggles within the Church as various factions compete for influence, leading to conflicts. Tensions may escalate further due to disagreements surrounding liturgy, rituals, and sacraments, as well as differing theological viewpoints on fundamental doctrines. Within the Church, which includes diverse ethnic groups, conflicts can arise when ethnic affiliations overshadow religious unity. The country's federal structure also influences Church governance, with regional autonomy contributing to factionalism

within the EOTC. Throughout its history, the Church has faced persecution and demonstrated resilience, shaping how its leaders interpret conflicts. Underlying tensions often revolve around fears of cultural and religious identity loss, aggravated by government involvement in Church affairs. Political decisions regarding the recognition of Synods can impact factional disputes, while conflicts over Church property ownership and management can intensify. Additionally, struggles for control over Church finances can exacerbate power struggles among different groups. Generational differences also play a role in conflict resolution, with younger leaders advocating for relevance and adaptability, while older leaders may resist change. This information was gathered during an interview held on Monday, March 11, 2024.

Two church bishops strongly argued external factors influence and exacerbate conflicts within the church. According to key informants, Africa's colonial legacy continues to cast a long shadow, with former colonial powers like Germany, France, and Britain still wielding significant influence. The arbitrary borders drawn during colonial times often disregarded ethnic boundaries, resulting in diverse ethnic groups within modern nation-states. This external control perpetuates ethnic conflicts and political tensions in Africa. Exclusive governance practices that favor certain ethnic groups can further exacerbate hostility, with ethnic identity often serving as a rallying point for conflicts. (The interview with the key informants was conducted on Monday, 11-March-2024).

The remaining key informants, comprising bishops and community leaders, argued that the struggle for power frequently aligns with ethnic affiliations, as political leaders exert influence over church policies and governance. Ethiopia's federal structure, dividing the country into ethnically based regions, impacts the church, potentially leading to factionalism. Political decisions regarding the recognition of synods can also fuel factional disputes within the church. External actors exploit Africa's abundant natural resources, such as diamonds, further fueling ethnic tensions. Conflict diamonds, mined under exploitative conditions, contribute to ongoing conflicts. Neighboring countries often play significant roles

in regional conflicts, with their involvement driven by selfish economic interests, as exemplified in the "First African World War." Historical persecution shapes how leaders interpret conflicts within the EOTC, with fears of cultural and religious identity loss driving tensions. These historical traumas intersect with external pressures, contributing to the internationalization of ethnic conflicts, particularly in East and West Africa. Prolonged conflicts in these regions are sustained by military support and the illicit diamond trade from neighboring countries (The interviews with the bishops and community leaders were conducted on Monday, 11-March-2024).

All Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo church bishops acknowledged that interpretations of religious texts may vary among leaders and followers, while disagreements regarding liturgical practices and sacraments can create tensions. Ethnic and regional considerations influence the interpretation of religious teachings, with different ethnic groups within the church often using distinct languages for worship, leading to potential misunderstandings. Historical persecution shapes how conflicts are perceived by leaders, with fears of cultural and religious identity loss contributing to tensions. Engaging in dialogue with other religious communities facilitates mutual understanding and dispels misconceptions. Training clergy and followers in sound doctrine and critical thinking helps address misunderstandings within the EOTC. Organizing workshops on religious tolerance and understanding can further promote harmony within the community (The interview with the bishops was conducted on Monday, 11-March-2024.)

According to senior managers from the town administration and police officers, ethno-religious entrepreneurs contribute to the ethnicization of religious conflicts within the church. Key informants argued that these individuals exploit ethnic identity for personal gain, highlighting religious identity as a defining feature of ethnicity to deepen divisions. Ethno-religious entrepreneurs aim to control church properties, finances, and institutions, garnering financial support from fellow co-religionists to reinforce ethnic divides. They manipulate clergy

appointments to favor their ethnic group and use provocative language to sow discord among followers. Through social media platforms, they spread divisive narratives and false information about rival factions, fostering mistrust. They ally with like-minded political leaders to advocate for policies benefiting their faction within the church. They infiltrate decision-making bodies and influence church policies, shaping congregational dynamics and selectively interpreting religious texts to justify their faction's actions. Promoting exclusivity, ethno-religious entrepreneurs silence dissenting voices and reinterpret historical events to portray their faction as victims, rallying support for their cause (The interview with the senior managers and police officers was conducted on Monday, 11-March-2024.)

According to community leaders, in the post-colonial era, Ethiopia accepted ethnic self-determination as a basic principle of democracy, which is seen as a way to promote democracy. Given the presence of many ethnic groups in Ethiopia, the federal structure of the country has presented an opportunity for the church to expand democracy. However, some bishops have refrained from giving profiles in different media, asserting that the Orthodox faith belongs to one nation. The leaders argue that this position could undermine the church's ability to do God's work more effectively. The leaders also noted that political actors seek control over church properties and finances, attracting financial support from co-religionists and using social media platforms to spread divisive narratives. False information about rival factions contributes to mistrust, while reinterpretations of historical events portray one's own ethnic group as victims, rallying support. Political actors also manipulate clergy appointments to favor their ethnic group and employ inflammatory language to create divisions among followers. Selective interpretations of religious texts are used to justify their faction's actions, often promoting exclusivity and excluding dissenting voices (The interview with the community leaders was conducted on Monday, 11-March-2024.)

According to the senior managers from the town administration and police officers, the actions of radical Oromo groups have impacted the relationship between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Oromo community. The key

informants explained that some radical Oromo factions view the church as being tied to Amhara and Tigray interests, leading to controversy. On the other hand, the radical Amhara groups' insistence on one language and one religion has played a major role in aggravating tensions in the multi-ethnic context. In addition, the use of Ge'ez in religious services is seen by some radical Oromo groups as a sign that they want their mother tongue, Oromo, to be included in religious practices. The informants stated that this demand for linguistic representation in religious services is viewed as fair by these Oromo groups (The interview with the senior managers and police officers was conducted on Wednesday, 06-March-2024.)

The key informants explained that the far-reaching Oromo Orthodox community has demanded increased representation and control over the church's property, finances, and the appointment of Oromo clergy to key leadership positions. By emphasizing the cultural and religious identity of the Oromo, some individuals have been marginalized, leading them to convert to Protestantism. This has affected the relationship between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Oromo community. These groups have made efforts to ensure the recognition of Oromo cultural and religious rights within the church, which has sometimes conflicted with traditional views. Although some Oromo leaders have attempted to promote interfaith dialogue and build bridges, radical elements in the Oromo community have rejected these initiatives and may continue to contribute to divisions within the church.

The Church has a rich history dating back to the 4th century, serving as a significant unifying factor in Ethiopian identity and culture. However, its historical significance also renders it a focal point for ethnic tensions, particularly perceived by some radical Oromo factions who view the EOTC as aligned with Amhara and Tigrayan interests. These factions advocate for increased representation, control over Church properties, and the incorporation of Afaan Oromo in religious practices, further deepening divisions within the EOTC. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's endeavors to reunite the EOTC showcase political acumen, as efforts such as bringing back the 4th Patriarch from exile contribute to his project of

national reconciliation. Despite facing challenges in addressing ethnic tensions, the EOTC can play a pivotal role in fostering dialogue, understanding, and peaceful coexistence. Education, interfaith engagement, and inclusivity stand out as essential tools in this endeavor' (Date of interview on Wednesday-06- March, -2024).

The current situation concerning the appointment of bishops without the permission of the Holy Synod and the actions of the apostate bishops, which have had an effect on the ethnic and religious change in the church community in the city of Waliso, are argued by the main informants who think that it is the actions of the apostate. By tying national identity to religious leadership, by fostering sectarianism in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, bishops exacerbate the existing ethnic conflict. While the Holy Synod is serving as a high authority in the church, during the Tigray war, a bishop said in Medea that he cannot be expected from one part of the Synod, and when some of them appoint bishops without their permission, the unity and the canon system will be tested. The church community has experienced a split in the city of Waliso, with some followers lining up with the apostate bishops while others remain loyal to the Holy Synod' (Date of interview on Wednesday-06- March, -2024).

Conclusion

Based on the discussion, we understand that religion plays a crucial role in any society. Despite being diverse across societies, its fundamental purpose remains consistent. Religion serves to uphold order and peaceful coexistence within society, while also providing individuals with meaning in life and actions. Research indicates that although non-religious ethnic issues are the primary drivers of conflicts, religious factors are often intertwined in ethnic conflicts. Religious tensions may arise when the beliefs of one ethnic group are perceived as threatened by another, or when religious laws are interpreted to justify conflicting actions. Religion can be drawn into ethnic conflicts originating from secular causes through the use of religious institutions and the assertion of religious legitimacy in the conflict. In some instances, this religious involvement can modify a initially secular conflict into a religious one.

The conflict within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Weliso Town, exacerbated by government involvement, has highlighted deep-rooted ethnic and religious tensions. The crisis escalated due to delayed communication from the church, leading to widespread violence, displacement, and psychological trauma among followers. The government's support for the faction led by Abuna Sawiros, which unilaterally appointed bishops without the Holy Synod's approval, sparked violent confrontations. Ethnic entrepreneurs and government forces have both directly and indirectly supported the renegade Synods, contributing to acts of vandalism and unrest. Media coverage and internet blackouts further complicated the situation, while followers adhered to traditional protest practices, underscoring their allegiance to the EOTC despite government opposition.

The division within the EOTC highlights the broader societal tensions between the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups, reflecting a struggle for cultural and linguistic representation within the church. The dissent ing Synods' advocacy for the use of the Oromo language and the appointment of culturally aware bishops underscore the demands of the Oromo community. Despite the EOTC's efforts to address

these concerns, including translating religious texts into Afan Oromo, tensions continue. The EOTC's historical significance and its perceived association with specific ethnic groups have led to perceptions of bias and exclusion. Looking ahead, promoting dialogue, understanding, and a balanced approach to religious autonomy and national unity is essential for the EOTC to navigate these intricate dynamics and foster peace and unity among its adherents.

Recommendations

The Holy Church Synod must prioritize achieving internal clarity and exhibiting steadfast adherence to canonical and dogmatic rules, all while upholding loyalty to divine law and order. In their role as spiritual leaders, they need to separate themselves from political figures who may mix religion and politics, which could lead to confusion and discord. It is essential to carefully examine whether their support for the Oromo people genuinely prioritizes their well-being, or if it is driven by personal or group interests.

Acknowledging that not all citizens practice the same religion, the Synod should be aware of the possibility of significant religious and ethnic conflicts that may result in mass casualties, depletion of resources, and national devastation. It is crucial for both sides to engage in dialogue, offer apologies to the nation, and eradicate the cultivation of ethnic differences in their communication to build trust and ensure lasting peace

The EOTC Holy Synod's silence is not effective in achieving lasting peace. The Synod should actively participate in discussions to address the ongoing conflict and openly share their proposed solutions with the public, government, and other stakeholders. The independent actions of certain Synods, without consulting the main Synods, could have led to widespread unrest. However, the lack of broad societal involvement suggests that the issues raised did not resonate widely. The majority of society remained uninvolved, instead praying for peace between the conflicting parties, showing that followers have a better understanding and insight than the conflicting Synods. It would have been preferable if religious leaders had

refrained from pushing political agendas and instead focused on serving God and upholding the church's traditions and teachings. Ongoing conflicts in Ethiopia are a significant concern and require immediate attention from all parties. The ethnicization of religious conflicts has had a negative impact on the country's social, economic, and political progress, threatening national security. These aggressive acts have undermined national unity and integration.

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