



THE EMERGING DYNAMICS OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIES AND CONFLICTS IN SOUTH WESTERN ETHIOPIA

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with the emerging dynamics of socio-religious controversies and conflicts in south western Ethiopia particularly in Jimma Zone. Religious controversies and conflicts have become topics of discussion among peoples across Ethiopia, particularly in Jimma. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the emerging dynamics of socio-religious controversies and conflicts in Omo Nadda woreda. To this end, qualitative data gathering method was employed. A total of thirty six research participants: from the dwellers, religious leaders, administrative and police offices of woreda and zonal level were purposely selected and interviewed. Besides, FGDs and case study was conducted. The research participants were drawn from different social strata, gender, age, ethnic background, marital status and religious background. Moreover, relevant documents were reviewed. All the data generated through these data gathering tools were analyzed thematically and meanings were constructed out of them. The study examined and tried to identify different factors contributing to Muslim-Christian controversies and conflicts. Similarly, it explored how the emerging religious teachings undermined the healthy relationship between the inhabitants. The study further examined controversies over religious radicalization among different sections of the community and how the local authorities have been trying to resolve religious conflicts and mitigate religious controversies in south western Ethiopia.

KEYWORDS: Damera, hijira, Khawariyya, Sufiyya, nama Keenya, Khawariyya

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INTRODUCTION

In Ethiopia, religion is deeply ingrained into the socio-cultural and politico-historical life of the people. Notwithstanding to some erratic misconceptions, Ethiopia, to all intents and purposes continued to be a hub for two major religions - Christianity and Islam. These principal religions played and continue to play an important role in the social, cultural and the political life of the people. By and large, these two religions enjoyed periods of peaceful co-existence that is punctured by brief periods of crisis (Hussein, 2006). Therefore, their historical relation is intermittently marked by a period of crisis and cooperation; forceful conversion and tolerance as well. According to Tadesse Tamrat, the period of peaceful coexistence the two religions had at their first contact was short lived, and hostility seemed to have started as early as the beginning of the eighth century /after a century of the first *hijra* (615 AD) (Tadesse, 1972:31).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the hopes that the 1995 Ethiopian constitution has guaranteed religious freedom and equality, the current developments of socio-religious controversies and conflicts have become topics of discussion among people across the nation and south western Ethiopia experienced serious socio-religious

controversies and conflicts. These controversies and conflicts caused local crises wherein a number of religious institutions (churches) and houses burnt. Thousands of Christian communities were displaced and forced to leave their homes. These causalities had attracted the attention of both local and international Media outlet. In the meantime, both governmental and non-governmental institutions had tried their best to safely handle and contain the crisis there. The crises continued to reconstruct themselves and tended to relapse from time to time. This was such a core problematic area that this study seeks to address.

A number of studies have been conducted on the issues of conflict in Ethiopia. For instance, Assefa (1999) focuses on ethnic integration and conflict in the case of Oromo and Amhara settlers in AroAddisAlemof North Eastern Wollega. Tizazu (2007) conducted research on inter-ethnic conflict in South-Western Ethiopia, a case between Zeiseand Dirashe communities. Asnake (2010) carried out research on inter-ethnic group conflicts in the Awash Valley of Ethiopia focused on the case of Affar and KarrayuOromo. Dejene (2002) focused on conflict and conflict resolution. All these researchers did not directly focus on socio-religious controversies and conflicts. To fill the gap, this paper gives due emphasis and examines socio-religious controversies and conflicts between Muslims and Christian communities in the social setting.



THE OVERALL OBJECTIVE OF THIS PAPER

Currently, socio-religious controversies and conflicts have become serious issue generally across the nation and particularly in south western parts of Ethiopia/Jimma Zone. These controversies and conflicts had greatly affected the living conditions of the people. However, the underlying root causes of these controversies and conflicts had not yet been systematically researched. Thus, the overall objective of this paper is to assess the emerging dynamics of socio-religious controversies and conflicts. To this end, the specific objectives of this paper were: to identify the major factors contributing to the prevalence of socio-religious controversies and conflicts between Muslims and Christians; to explore how far contesting elements among Islamic sects affect the healthy relationships between Muslims and Christian community; and to examine the perception of the people of the study area towards religious radicalization.

METHODOLOGY

With regard to method of data collection and data analysis, I employed qualitative method. The study was based on data obtained from primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected using interview, focus group discussions (here after FGD) and Case Study. These have enabled me to gather vital information on the socio-religious controversies and conflicts particularly not only between Muslim and Christian communities but also within Islam sects. I have also gathered secondary information to substantiate the primary data. Secondary data were collected from religious scriptures, books, journals, magazines, various workshop proceedings and reports on the issues of Christianity and Islam. It was collected for critical analyses on major factors that contributing to Christian-Muslim controversies and conflicts relevant to the research problem. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed to select thirty-six research participants for all methods of data gathering. In addition, the research participants were drawn from different social strata, gender, age, marital status and religious background in order to consider inclusion criteria. In line with this, Bernard (2006: 187) notes that there are many good reasons in using purposive and snowball sampling procedures. Hence, purposive sampling is widely used in intensive and critical case studies, while using snowball procedure avoids the ethical problems and can produce samples that are less biased. Target populations were selected purposely from both adherents of Islam and Christianity. Zonal and district administrators, head of police office were also included. The assumption is that they could give relevant information as they were the practitioners. In order to identify the immediate cause of socio-religious controversies and conflicts, I utilized one case study in Asendabo town because the 2011 Muslim-Christian conflict was started in the town. When I conducted this case, I mainly focused on how, when and by whom the conflict was started and spread to the surrounding towns. This

case study was not only helped me to identify triggering factors but also the roles played by some individuals to instigate Muslim-Christian conflicts within the social setting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Factors Contributing to Socio-Religious Controversies and Conflicts

As I tried to mention in the previous chapter, conflicts between Muslims and Christians with some religious manifestations have been experienced in different districts of Jimma Zone such as Gomma, Ommo Naadda, Karsa and Tiro Afata. Though the conflicts have had some clear religious manifestations such as burning religious institutions of the contestant party, my informants have forwarded multiple reasons of the conflict. Even adherents of similar religion have different explanations. Some informants grounded their explanations on various experiences in the past instead of limiting themselves to the latest incidents. Other than religion many informants are of the opinion that competition over resource such as urban space is the basic reason and religion is simply an excuse. Ethnicity has also got its own role in the conflicts. The *Khawariyya* factors, external linkages and religious polarization might have contributed with various degrees. All factors that contributing to Muslim-Christian conflict coincide with the idea of Cunningham (1998), who argues that the roots of conflict stem from group competition and the pursuit of power and resources. This assumption operates on conscious motivational factors in a material oriented environment. This is of importance to religious conflicts and controversies in Jimma zone because the same concepts are applicable to sectarian conflicts between Muslim and Christian communities. Thus, I will discuss how all these factors contributed to Muslim-Christian conflicts in the following section.

a) Competition over the Physical Space (land)

Informants of the study area reported that to have more physical space is one of the factors; even the basic momentum to conflicts and controversies between Christians and Muslims. Conflict over the issue of physical space (on which churches would be built) between Muslims and Christians emanates from four dimensions. Firstly, the construction of churches in Jimmais always preceded by opposition from Muslim side with varying degrees. Muslims more and more challenge of the areas in which the churches are intended to be built on. For instance, the 2006 Muslim-Christian conflict at Bashasha of Gommadistricta was the issue of land over which Muslims strongly opposed Orthodox Church. At a time, Orthodox Church had got permission from Gommaadministration to construct a church on a certain site. However, Muslims opposed and resisted the construction claiming that the site was traditionally theirs and used to be burial ground for Muslim community in the vicinity.

One of the research participants expressed his opinion bluntly that “Muslims do not want to see the construction of churches in the district for two reasons. The first reason is Muslims consider themselves as the host community in the area and consider others as immigrants from somewhere else. Second, the number of Muslims exceeds by far that of Christians. Using their demographic supremacy, they exhibit a tendency to influence Christians.”¹

The second dimension is proximity (distance between a Church and a mosque). Spatial proximity (nearness of a church to a mosque) is another land related issue which would lead members of the two principal religions to assume a confrontational attitude and get into conflict. Informants reported that a more contentious issue regarding the competition over the physical space among different religious groups is the proximity factor. For example, the 2006 Muslim-Christian conflict in Didessa Districta of Illu Ababora Zone was a case in point. On the celebration of *Mesqal* (a festival by the Orthodox Church) a smoke flew up from the *Damera* and entered in to a nearby mosque. That was just enough to ignite animosity and conflict erupted. When Orthodox Christians built their *Damera* (on the eve of *Mesqel* September 26) at a square or open space found in front of the Mosque, Muslims requested that the *Damera* be removed to another place far from the gate of their Mosque. However, the Christians refused and responded instead by throwing stones on the Mosque for which Muslims too responded by doing the same. They threw stones towards those who were throwing stone towards them. This escalated into a violent conflict that resulted in a number of deaths and churches and many houses were burned and displacing a number of local residents (Zelalem, 2008: 78).

Third, according to one of anonymous informant from Christian side, the inequitable piece of land allocation or standard for each religious group is another dimension over which the two groups come into confrontation. Research participants explained that Muslims and Christians are still claiming larger physical space for the construction of mosques and churches corresponding with their demographic size (number of adherents). However, the chances of getting their claims are encountered by various challenges. Regarding these, the Christian FGD discussants put forth their complaints as follows:

It is not easy for us to get a plot of physical space (land) to build a church and we also have not enough piece of land to be used as a burial place. It is obvious that majority of the inhabitants of the districta are Muslims and it is difficult for us to get a plot of land to construct a church. Even when we buy houses from individuals and begin to worship in, we face challenges from different corners. Surprisingly, we are perceived as “unwelcomed” foreigners. We are not equally served

or we are disadvantaged in the acquisition (allocation) of land compared to the followers of other religions especially the Muslims. There is a visible inequity in treatment and access to land for churches and cemeteries by local officials.

Furthermore, one of the anonymous key informants from Omo Nadda administration candidly responded that another dimension of the problem related to land is that, while a private person handed down his/her own residential house for their religious organization, the land transferred to the religious organization would, after a time, be somehow modified or rebuilt and end up to be a church. This is a usual land or ownership transfer method employed by different protestant denominations as they have difficulty to access land. One of the FGD participants from Christian described the issue as follows:

Even though the government provides us some pieces of land for the construction of churches and cemeteries, what we have at present is insufficient to provide good institutional service in comparison with the number of the adherents. To solve this problem, we have started to purchase buildings and old houses from individuals to refurbish and use as a center of worship.

For instance, the cause of the 2011 Muslim-Christian conflict at Asandabo of Omo Nadda was the issue of land. According to my anonymous key informants from Omo Nadda administration,

Qale Hiwot church, a protestant Church with most of its members from South Nations, Nationalities and People of Regional State (SNNPRS) requested a piece of land to construct church in Asandabo town. The Church’s request was denied. As it could not succeed in getting public land, the church bought a house from an individual resident in the town to use it as a church. A Muslim neighbor also wanted to buy the same house though he was late. As the followers of the Qale Hiwot church started to worship in their new church the neighboring Muslims raised concern over the establishment of the church in the middle of the town. It was in the compound of this church that the Holy Qur’an was allegedly torn apart and used as a toilet paper. This has raised suspicion of conspiracy by a Muslim who wanted to buy the house, which later turned into church and by the few Muslims who were worried with the establishment of the church in their neighborhood. Interestingly, several informants, both Christians and Muslims, share this view.

Rural area inhabitants of the research setting consider land as a primary source of wealth, social status, and power (Deres 2010). As land is the foundation for shelter, food, and economic activities, Muslims are not much interested with the spontaneous

1 Anonymous Christian informant

immigrants from other regional states of Ethiopia. In line with statement, Mamo (2006) critically argues that:

Land and its substantial use are of great local, national and global concerns. Dependence on land as the major sources of survival becomes more and more crucial to those parts of the globe occupying the bottom position in the hierarchy of global socio-economic development. Ethiopia being at the bottom of the scale of development ... depends on land virtually for all of its needs. Besides its economic significances, land entails vital socio-cultural meanings and values. Land is a symbol of identity and entails a religious value.

b) External Linkages

It is true that the two principal faiths, Christianity and Islam including other minor denominations in *Jimma* have their own linkages with external governmental and NGOs including religious charity organizations. These external linkages, which are the forces behind religious controversies and conflicts in *Jimma*, are not directly observable. Rather they are visible indirectly in a number of ways. Most of these linkages are related with generating funds to deliver “holistic ministries” (serving the people in many ways other than preaching the Gospel) but mainly focusing on religions and supporting their pro-religious institutions by the name of initiating / promoting local developments.²

Subsequent to the country’s open policy for market economy after the downfall of the Marxist oriented *Derg* regime, religious institutions and NGOs have claimed permission to run projects under the name of investment in addition to expanding their evangelism. As one of my anonymous research participants puts forth;

Missionaries in Jimma have been working in development work as well as evangelism. Catholic and Protestant churches like Qale Hiwot, Mekane Iyesus, Genet, and Meseret Kristos have been creating linkages with trans-local organizations like World Vision, Compassion International, and Tear Fund have been involved in training and equipping civil servants to work among Muslims. They have been delivering “holistic approach in ministry” to both Christian and Muslim communities. The “holistic ministry” which they call in Amharic “Hullentenawi Agelgilot” needs to support new Muslim converts and poor Christians in churches. Helping the needy (poor) and orphans, establishing elementary and secondary schools, health and water projects are a few of these approaches. For instance, Ethiopia Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus runs ‘Nonno Integrated Rural

Development Projects’, and Jimma ‘HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Program’. World Vision runs ‘Rehoboth water, sanitation and Hygiene Program for Ethiopia’ (RWASHP). Meserete Kristos Church leads ‘Ten Meserete Kristos church child Sponsorship Programs’. Qale Hiwot Church has been delivering various services for orphan children and destitute families.’³

On the other hand, adherents of Islam are not happy with these “holistic ministry” approach provided by missionaries since it is assumed as the means of expanding Christianity in different districts of *Jimma* zone. One of the key informants from *Wahabbiyya* remarked:

Government has allowed and supported evangelical preaching in stadiums due to these holistic ministries and these in turn have enabled adherents of Protestantism to have open-air venues and to preach against Islam. This kind of attempt by Christians has led to resentment and opened the door to Arab Muslim charities.

On the side of Islam, the external linkage of Islamic movements in *Jimma* is an extension of the long tradition of external influences to the Ethiopian Muslims but with by far great dimension (Hussein 1994). The main part of this influence could be observed from the financial hold up the unusual Islamic sects have been receiving from Saudi Arabia. Informants reported that the affiliation of each Islamic movement of the study area to Saudi Arabia enabled them to gain enormous funds, which, on the other hand, led them partly in to disagreements. They elaborated that the *Wahabiyya* is visibly dependent on the fund flow from the Middle East through different channels especially from Saudi Arabia for different purposes. One of the purposes of Saudi funds in *Jimma* is to expand number mosques in towns and rural parts. The augmentation of linkages of Islamic sects of *Jimma* with the Middle East particularly with Saudi Arabia challenges the moment spread of Christianity in *Jimma*.

Surprisingly, the responses of both Muslim and Christian communities revealed that the poverty of the localities of *Jimma* has forced the government to give permission to foreigners who have a hidden agenda to operate in the local setting of *Jimma* in the name of investment from the west and the Middle East. This means, inter religious movements and competitions between Christian and Muslim communities have trans-local dimensions, particularly the west and the Middle East perspectives. This idea coincides with the ideas of Dereje (2011) who argued “the rise of extremist ideas and inter-faith tension in contemporary Ethiopia has indeed external dimensions, a manifestation of Ethiopia’s participation in global debates and conflicts” and Medhane (2004) who reminds us the causes of the current religious conflicts and tensions between Christians and Muslims is the involvements of

2 Anonymous Informants from *Jimma* Zonal administration.

3 *Ibid.*

transnational actors.

c) Religious Polarization through Metaphors

Religious metaphors used to refer to religious organizations have also become factors that create a strained relationship between the different religious groups in the area and accentuated polarization among them. According to my informants, there is a rising tendency of religious polarization. Interviews from the study area revealed that different terms and sometimes phrases are used as metaphors to simply identify one's own religious identity. Members of different religious groups do not tend to define other adherents through the affirmation of positive qualities that are said to be manifested among their group's members. Rather they are contrasting these positive qualities by different metaphors. Some of these metaphors are: *nama keenya*⁴(our people), *Yesinde Haymanot* (literary regarded as religion of wheat) and *Yenaftenya Haymanot* (literary regarded as religion of gun). Of course, it is difficult to find the anthropological concepts of these terms which are widely spread and used for constructing religious boundary in the local community.

Nama Keenya (Our people): Among the inhabitants of Jimma, the metaphor of '*nama keenya*' ('*nya*' is pronounced as '*gna*') becomes an attribute to religious polarization recently. The etymology of the phrase '*nama keenya*' is derived from *Afan Oromo* terms. The phrase "*nama-keenya*" literally means 'our person (plural our people). Before two decades, the phrase had different meanings based on the context of *Afan Oromo*. First the '*nama keenya*' mainly implies people having blood relationships. This means, it was based on lineage or blood relationships. The metaphor had symbolized ethnic membership. It was boldly manifested with the common possession of peoples with same ethnic group. For instance, if a man is from Oromo ethnic group, he would be categorized under the '*nama keenya*' among the Oromo. This was too for *Amhara*, *Gurage*, *Dawuro* ethnic groups. This means Amhara, Gurage and Dawuro also said '*nama keenya*' for their own respective ethnic group.

However, with the passage of time things have been changed currently and the consideration/criteria to be '*nama keenya*' are based on adhering similar faith. One of the key informants forwarded that:

Religion seems to become the springboard for the formation of the 'nama keenya' metaphor in recent time. The Islam adherents began to say "nama keenya" to the Muslims who practice to wear shorter trouser, lengthen their beard, women who practice wearing niqab and hijab; and on the other hand, Orthodox Christians say nama keenya those who having cross in their necks).

4 Nama keenya- Afan Oromo term which implies literarily our people

This means having cross in one's own neck implies an adherent of Orthodox Christianity. This brought the ideal conflicts among different religious adherents. For instance, during Muslim- Christian incident of the 2011, the motto of the reaction was: Nama keenya (Our men) were affected and some of them oppressed, looted and robbed their property by the contestant group.

Yesinde Haymanot: The term '*Yesinde Haymanot*' becomes ordinary metaphor to show religious polarization. The phrase '*Yesinde Haymanot*' is originated from Amharic language. '*Sinde*' means wheat and '*Haymanot*' means religion. These two words together constitute '*Yesinde Haymanot*'. So, according to the context of *Jimma*, the phrase '*Yesinde Haymanot*' metaphor is given as a name for the adherents of Protestantism.

According to the responses of adherents of Protestantism: In the previous time missionaries from different western European countries had come and provided 'wheat' and 'oil' for people who occasionally suffered from frequent famine, starvations and drought. Because of most of those missionaries were adherents of Protestantism, on one side they preached the gospel, and on the other side, they had offered provisions. The missionaries also made the beneficiaries to participate in developmental work in order to compensate for they had received. At a time, the missionaries had used this open chance to conduct their evangelical activities and most of the beneficiaries probably had converted to Protestantism. Thus, nowadays, the adherents of Islam and Orthodox Church have given the nick-name of '*Yesinde Haymanot*' for the adherents of Protestantism. Protestantism is associated with foreign missionaries. They are considered as the agents of western countries, particularly America. Thus, this kind of tagging would create stereotype and also enhances religious polarization among adherents of different religions.

Yeneftenya Haymanot: *Yeneftenya Haymanot* is another metaphor used for labeling 'Orthodox Christianity'. The etymology of the term '*neft*' means 'gun'. Accordingly, '*Nefteña*' literary implies the group or the class who ruled the mass by guns or weapons. This means, according to the context of Ethiopia '*Nefteña*' implies the exploitative section of the ruling class, who had played a pivotal role in dominating and ruling the mass by arms (weapons) in the former imperial regime. One of the key informants from Muslim side explained that:

'Yenafxanya Haymanot' is used as a metaphor for adherents of Orthodox Church because during imperial regime church and state were strongly interconnected. This means, political power, Orthodox Christianity and being Ethiopian were so intertwined that it was almost unbelievable for one to exist without the other. Ethiopian state was equated with Orthodox Church and Ethiopia

was seen as a land belonging 'exclusively' to Church and Abyssinian state. Thus, nowadays, due to the past legacies of imperial regime, the adherents of Islam and Protestantism use the nick-name 'Yenafxegna Haymanot' for the adherents of Orthodox Church.

From the above quote one can possibly understand that stamping a derogatory marker to religious institutions might develop stereotype among the inhabitants of the study area and also might be potential for intra and inter- religious conflicts and controversies.

d) The *Khawariyya* Dilemma

I used the term *Khawariyya* because that is how it is locally called. According to a scholar the group largely tends to resemble the *Taqfir*, one of Islamic sects in Egypt (De Waal, 2004:10). Most of my informants agree that in the context of the recently emerging Islamic sects and a growing tendency of religious radicalism such a dispute between Muslims and Christians could easily transform itself into religious conflicts and controversies. In that regard, both Christians and Muslims accuse the adherents of the *khawariyya* sect of using this incident as an opportunity to instigate a conflict between Muslims and followers of other religions. Some justify the involvement of the adherents of the militant *Khawariyya* sect by citing cases of Muslims being terrified by fellow Muslims for not participating in the attacks on churches, or for hesitating to rise up against Christians. Others justify the involvement of an external force such as *Khawariyya* by referring to the strange characters of the recent conflicts in the area. According to one of the adherents of *Sufiyya* informant:

In the past there was no problem between Christians and Muslims. Muslims and Christians had been living in peace and friendly way for a long time. But nowadays, such kind of peaceful relationship has increasingly deteriorated. Particularly, the young generation is influenced by the teachings of Khawariyya. However, they do not have separate mosques they use separate teaching materials which is against the peaceful relationship between Muslims and Christians.

Khawariyya is strongly blamed by inhabitants of the study area as religious extremists and threat to peace and security of the society at large. Surprisingly, people extensively gossip about the existence and Islamic teachings of the *Khawariyya*, but no one even showed sympathy with them. And there is no conclusive evidence whether such kinds of doctrinal marginalization is disseminated by *Khawariyya* as one can hardly find the physical presence of the adherents of the group in the research setting. That might be because of the official discourses and allegations that the *Khawariyya* are responsible for the recent violent Muslim-Christian conflicts.

Some explanations exaggerate the past peaceful relationship between Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia. However, the recent conflict is quite incomparable with the past incidents in magnitude. This is also attributed to the current religious dynamism and the result of the latest Islamic teachings.

Controversies over Religious Radicalization

These days, religious radicalization becomes such a central issue of debate and topics of discussion not only in Jimma but also across the country. Primarily, Federal and Regional States give wide media coverage and talk about the issue. Different conferences are conducted across the nation by considering religious radicalization as the main agenda. Several panels and forums are conducted on similar agenda. Above all, public meetings are common at every level targeting Islamic sects. In this section, my intension is to examine the controversial issue around religious radicalization among local authorities', Muslims, and Christians informants.

A) Local Authority Understanding of Religious Radicalization

The local authorities are giving enormous attention to the issue of Islamic radicalization as religious related conflicts are emerging in different corners. In Jimma issues related to religion have become everyday agenda among different sections of the community.

The state is widely using mass media under its control: newspapers, magazines, radio, television and internet based websites are widely used to manipulate the information and facts on the ground. This has, in fact, made my fieldwork very tough. Everyone talks about religion, but very few are comfortable to discuss such a sensitive issue with a researcher. Let me start the controversy over religious radicalization by citing materials on religious fundamentalism in general. .

In its discourse on the media under its control and in several meetings, the Ethiopian State associates religious radicalization with any religious based activities which create barriers on the country's democratization process and hindering development efforts. Attempts to impose one's own religion on others by force, hindering others to exercise and promote their religion are manifestation of radicalization in general. Administrative and security officials at different levels use similar official rhetoric. In the context of Jimma:

Religious radicalization is mostly associated with Khawariyya because the group emphasize on themes such as: Muslims should not be governed by Christian government's rules and regulations including country's law and constitution instead be governed by Sharia law. Mobilizing people not to pay taxes and not to buy fertilizers, instead encourage establishing Muslim community self-help fund. Muslims must obey only

Allah based on the Holy Qur'an and Hadith. Qur'an gives order that Muslim community only obey to Allah. Muslim people who obeyed for Christian's government are Khafirs.⁵

The official targets the *Khawariyya*. However, no one identifies him/herself with the *Khawariyya*. Thus, any Muslim suspected of instigating violence can be labeled as adherent of *Khawariyya*. A document I managed to get from Jimma Zone Police office indicate that the major bases of *Khawariyya's* operation in Jimma Zone are: Limu-kosa, Shabe Sombo, Omo Nadda, Xiroo Afata, Deddo, Aggaro town districts of Jimma Zone. In this year only, two hundred thirty-seven suspected adherents of *khawariyya* were brought to Jimma high court, and twelve of them were convicted, sixty-four individuals are on appointments; forty-nine individuals were given warning; one hundred twelve were acquitted.

B. Christians Understanding of Religious Radicalization

My Christian informants raise concerns over what they called a growing local tendency towards religious radicalization. Similar to the officials, Christians also associate radicalization with *khawariyya*. Christians suspect that the *Khawariyya* are anti-Christian movement sponsored by external forces. For them the *Khawariyya* are the most radical group posing supreme threat and societal frustration.

The Christians argue that there is tangible manifestation of religious radicalization. For instance, firstly, they accuse the religious fundamentalists of instigating the 2006 and 2011 Muslim-Christian violent conflicts which resulted in loss of lives and destruction of churches and a number of houses in the study area.

Secondly, the Christians in the study area relate the decline of traditional voluntary association such as *Jigii and Dabo* and the growing tendency of some elements of Arab cultures with religious radicalization. Indeed, a number of Muslim women who wear *niqab* and *hijab* have become more and more visible in public arenas including governmental institutions.

My anonymous Christian informants seem very much convinced of the official discourse about the *Khawariyya*. For instance one of the informants told me about a widely heard rumour about the religious teaching of the group.

The rumors primarily say Muslims should not make any relationships with Christians; Muslims should not obey Christian government and should not pay taxes to Christian state. Above all, the group considers cultures, values, customs and norms of host community as shirk, and instead they want to expand Arabic culture.

5 Anonymous informants from Jimma Zone administration.

Furthermore, Khawariyya agitates its adherents not to make healthy relationship with Christians, example, like participating in dabo, jigii, idir, with Christians are prohibited.

Beyond publicly circulating rumors and official discourses I could not get individuals who were agitated or who were victims of such agitation, other than the aforementioned violent Muslim-Christian conflicts.

C. Muslims Understanding of Religious Radicalization

The two major Islamic sects in the study area: *Sufiyya* and *Wahabbiyya* have different understandings of religious radicalization. At face value, both condemn *Khawariyya* as religious extremists and the most radical group causing major threat and societal frustration. However, the adherents of *Wahabbiyya* also criticize the state media, for associating Islam with religious radicalization as follow;

Media and few Media men with a biased mind often propagate their personal opinion, using the media as their vehicle. They overlook ethical issues especially when it comes to the question of Islam. The association of Islam and violence is a common misconception that the state Media is promoting about Islam. The People are often misinformed about Muslims through the images of television, magazines, radios, and in newspapers.

Muslim informants claimed that except few individuals (whom they do not mention) who carry out their hidden agenda in the name of Islam, there is no religious radicalization in *Jimma*. Such individuals always want to create problems between Christians and Muslims in the name of Islam to attain their personal gains.

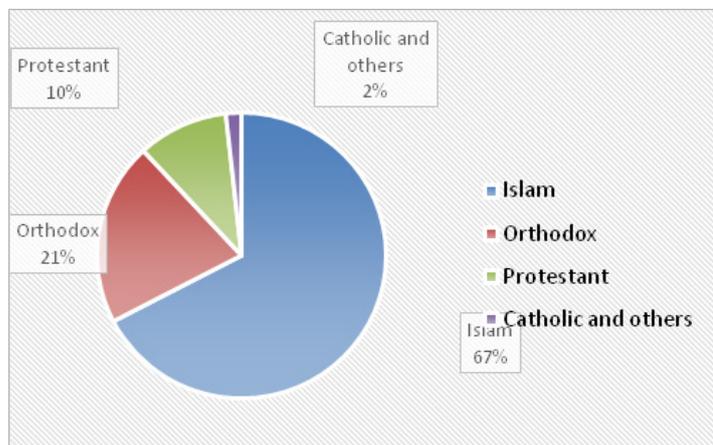
The issue of religious radicalization has been entered in to complex perception not only at research setting but also at national level. Different sections have different understanding on the issue. One religious group label another group as religious radicals. The emergence of *Khawariyya* adherents makes the issue of religious radicalization to have more political forms. Thus, according to most of my anonymous Christian and Muslim informants, in the context of the research setting, religious radicalization is not grounded on strict application that has been written in Holy Bible or Holy Qur'an. Rather it is more politicized by groundless rumors.

ORTHODOX AND PROTESTANT IN THE EYES OF OMO NADDA MUSLIMS

There are diverse religious groups in Omo Nadda. Among these religious groups, Muslims comprise about 67% of the total population. Historically, with the decline of *Gada* system and *Qallu* institution, the Oromo people of the study area were converted to Islam and adopted some elements of Islamic custom. Actually, the people opted for Islam instead of Christianity. This is because;

throughout the history of Ethiopia the Muslim community had developed a hatred for the highland Christian kings. For instance, in the past Muslim officials were often obligated to convert to “Christianity” when they joined the central government. These further pushed the people of Jimma to embrace Islam.

Chart 1: Omo Nadda Religious composition.



Source (CSA, 2007:341)

In the context of Omo Nadda, Muslims are considered as host community and most of the Christians are ‘outsiders’ who came to the area from different parts of the country, thus considered as the ‘Others’. This assumption is especially widely spread in rural areas where saying Mr ‘X’ is a Muslim is equivalent to saying he/she is a native of Jimma and Mr ‘Y’ is a Christian is equivalent to saying he/she is a migrant to the area from somewhere else. Different meanings are also attached to different Christian religions. For instance, Orthodox Christians are associated with the *Amhara* who were favored by the imperial regime and Protestant Christians are mostly migrants from the SNNPRS. According to one of anonymous Muslim informants, the recent rapid expansion of the Protestant Church created a fear that Christians (the same as saying other ethnic groups) might demographically dominate the area in the future. This view can be further explained by using the context behind the factors triggering the 2011 ‘Muslim-Christian conflict’ at Asandabo.

Triggering Factors of the 2011 Muslim-Christian Conflict

Case Analysis 1

My name is Mr. ‘X’ [for I promised to keep my informant anonymous]. I was born in 1972. I have been living and working in Asandabo for a decade now, since 2002. I have my own house in Asandabo. Last year, on the 2nd of March 2011, Qale Hiwot Church had started to construct another building within its courtyard. The construction workers were not employed based on their religious affiliation, and thus workers at site of the

construction of the new church were not homogenous in terms of religion. Therefore, we had both adherents of Christianity and Islam in the workforce. On 2 March 2011, a construction worker (who happened to be a Muslim by religion) went to one of the toilets in the courtyard of the church, where he found torn pieces of the Qur’an text. At the time, nobody knew who the perpetrator was. The person responsible for that action was not identified. But the worker who claimed to find the litter pieces of the Qur’an texts came out shouting at the top of his voice. And began telling to everybody what he discovered in the toilet. Then commotion started. Muslims in the workforce started crying. In a moment the news went and spread all over the town. A flock of people, including policemen, came from the town and its environs. Immediately, the police arrested and took us to the police station. The police did that just to control the surge of anger and to ensure peace and stability. Then, we were the only and the immediate suspects. The offended Muslims continued to march in the town all daylong shouting hysterically. And in the end, late into the night, at about 10:00 pm they decided to go and burn the old church and destroyed the one that was under construction. We were taken to jail in Jimma town and stayed there for two weeks. After an intensive investigation the police identified the convict. According to the findings of the investigation of the police, the convict was found to be an adherent of Islam. After we spent two weeks under the custody of the police; we were released and returned home.⁶

One can easily assume from the above narrative that the immediate cause for the conflict broke in Omo Nadda in 2011 was the torn pieces of the Qur’an text that alleged to be found in the toilet of a church. Then, it became the talk of everybody in the towns and villages of the zone. The news that “pieces of pages torn from the Qur’an are found in a toilet of a protestant church in Asandabo town” goes around. It expanded far and wide, like a wild fire, among the Muslim community all across the zone and beyond.

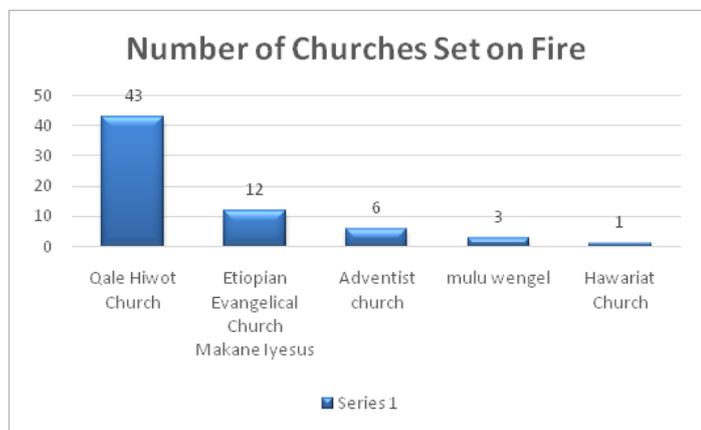
Nevertheless, one of the anonymous research participants from Christian side explained the incident as “it was all meticulously staged, dramatized and planned” crisis. To support this line of his argument, he raised the instant spread of the news in a campaign following the “staged” crisis. According to this informant the fast spread of the news is a good indication for the existence of a strong and coordinated networking among the adherents of Islam in the area. The coordinated action of burning churches all over the districts of the zone can also be evidence. The day the church

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at Asandabo town was set on fire (2nd of March 2011) the same action was immediately taken in Tiro Afata, Karsa and Limmu Kossa districts. Offended by the news of a staged crisis “Muslims continued to burn Protestants’ churches for five consecutive days (from 2 to 6 March 2011), and in less than a weekly time, 65 Protestant Churches were burnt down” he concluded.

Chart 2. Number of Churches Set on Fire



Source: Offices of Qale Hiwot and Makane Iyesus Churches in Jimma Town

This triggering factor was also more intensified as local authorities of the district gave less attention to the matter. One of the key informants reported that:

These days, majority of Muslims are holding senior posts both at zonal and different districts in Jimma. That is, Muslim mayors dominated every governmental institution across zonal level. Muslims want to voice their political grievances more openly and want to enjoy a much greater degree of religious freedom to compensate their previous objections. Under these new conditions, it is difficult to deal with internal pressure caused by every Islamic sect. For instance, what worsened the situation happened in Asanabo town was the laissez-fairness of the administrators of the districts. The mayor of the town did not give due attention for the issue. Due to this, the issue of burning churches was continued in the other towns of other districts like Nadda, Sarbo, Dimtu, Akko and others. In addition to that there was no attempt made to disclose the information of the tension to the regional state so that the region sends the necessary power to solve the problem. The fact that Media like VOA interviewed officials in the zone and districts and they considered the matter as it was very easy and manageable. Though it was frustrating to the Christians in the districta, the districta officials gave deaf-ear to the problem because they probably took the crisis as simple and could be solved easily.

According to one of anonymous Christian informants, other than the negligence and the ill motive of the convict, there was a push factor that led others to involve themselves in the burning of churches. These informants claimed that some Muslims had the information about the pretext used to incite the crisis. Thus, some of them were reluctant to be involved but their Muslim friends forced them to burn churches so as to evict the Christians from the area.

Local Authority Response to Socio- Religious Tension

It is common to see troubles and tensions linked to religion in different woredas of Jimma zone in recent times. As an example, Gomma and Didessa woredas in 2006, and Omo Nada, Tiro Afata and Karsa woredas in 2011 were areas of a great shake in the zone. In both times, inhabitants in the woredas were seriously hurt. People died, Christian churches were burned and residences of innocent citizens were also burned. Related to this problem, resources and different equipments were made out of use. Many people migrated to Jimma and the surrounding areas (Zelalem,2008).

Besides, a number of rumors which have been propagated around an Islamic sect called *Khawariyya* become more and more disseminated among the people and also become an area of concern. This has led the local government to strictly watch and control religious related activities. To tackle such rumors and tensions that emanated from religious related and others issues and eventually to maintain cordial relationships among the people, the local government has designed some strategies and mechanisms to control the situations. Especially, more emphasis is given to issues related to Islamic sect at large and *Khawariyya* in particular. Accordingly, among several mechanisms few are put forth as follows:

First and foremost local authorities mainly targeted *Khawariyya* probably based on the assumption that the group is a threat to stability among the inhabitants of *Jimma*. Of course the group has no official recognition. However, the group ideology is widely spread through all woredas of the zone. According to one of the anonymous officials from Omo Nadda woreda administration, the group focuses on young generation and urges Muslim community not to abide by Christian government except for Allah. The group also discourages the cordial relationship existing between Christian and Muslim communities. The group’s teaching (ideology) is said to have promoted intolerance in the relationships among people of the study area at large and between Christians and Muslims in particular. Thus, the local authorities are always busy to watch and constantly follow the adherents of the group and bring them before law.

Following the 2011 Muslim-Christian conflict the zonal authority established committees (forums) religious leaders at

zonal and woredas levels. The main objective of this committee is to strictly follow religion related problems and to bring together the conflicting parties in any case if possible. If the matter is beyond the committee, the group immediately reports to the nearest local government. The committee members come from different religious groups (mainly Muslims and Christians). The organizational structure of this committee is not confined to zonal level. The committee is also established at *kebele* levels. However, the committee has no clear rules and regulation on which it depends on in order to implement its mission. It is not such influential and powerful to handle religious related problems. So far it achieved nothing.

Furthermore, the local government established 'community policing committee' to get more information and to know more about what is going on within the community. It is believed that this committee can follow each and every issue that possibly pose problems to societal peace and security. The committee represents policemen throughout villages and thus acts as police man. The organizational structure of this committee also stretches from zonal up to *sub-kebele* levels. Here, according to the current administrative structure, one *kebele* is divided into three *sub-jigas*. That is one *kebele* has three *Jigas*. Each of this *Jiga* has one community policing committee. Each of this committee has horizontal and vertical relationships by which information can be shared among the concerned bodies (governmental bodies). The committee has strong relationships mainly with zonal and woreda police offices. In comparison with the former committee (forum of religious leaders), this is more effective in providing timely information for the local government.

Interestingly, religion has become an area of great tension and makes administrative issues more complex in all woredas of the zone. The local authorities are busy following up intra and inter-religious issues. Particularly, the *Wahabbiyya* and the *Khawariyya* are the main concerns. Here, surprisingly local authorities have given more attention and strictly watch out intra-Islam controversies more than inter-religious conflicts.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Currently, religious conflicts and controversies have become topics of discussion among peoples across Ethiopia, particularly in Jimma zone. This thesis dealt with the emerging dynamics of socio-religious controversies and conflicts in Omo Nadda woreda, Jimma Zone. To examine this issue, qualitative data gathering method was employed. A total of thirty six research participants: from the dwellers, religious leaders, administrative and police offices of woreda and zonal level were purposefully selected and interviewed. Besides, FGDs and Case study were conducted.

The study has specifically examined dynamism within Islam and controversies over religious radicalization. Islam has

demonstrated a great dynamism in JimmaZone recently. The developments within the last fifteen years reveal the emergence of *Wahabbiyya* and *Khawariyya* with new teachings. These groups have brought doctrinal reform movements and challenged the centuries old *Sufiyya* tradition in many ways.

The 2006 and 2011 socio-religious controversies and conflicts have adversely affected the inhabitants of Jimmazon. The recurrences of these conflicts are ideal conditions for the growth and developments of religious polarization and mistrust among religious groups. Though the conflicts have had some clear religious manifestations such as burning religious institutions of the contestant groups, there are multiple factors leading to the conflicts. Among others, competitions and controversies over the resource such as rural and urban space are the main reason. Clearly, ethnicity has also got a significant role in the conflicts as 95 % of total religious groups in Omo Nadda Woreda of Jimma Zone are Muslims from Oromo ethnic group.

The issue of religious radicalization has been entered into complex perception not only in Jimma but also across Ethiopia. Different sections of the communities have different understanding on the issue. One religious group labeled another group as religious groups radical. The emergence of *Khawariyya*, and what we have been informed about their teachings makes the issue of religious radicalization to have more political forms and orientation. This gave the state a room to intervene with in the matter of religion. Otherwise, in the context of Jimma, it is not possible to identify one religion and label it as radical. One can safely say, from the side of the adherents of reformists (*Wahabbiyya*), there is a tendency of strict application of the *Shari'a* and encouraging customs external to the local people.

Paradoxical to the past imperial regime which had considered Muslim communities of the country (particularly the Oromo) as the second citizens, the initially more liberal political atmosphere in Ethiopia since the 1991 has facilitated the public expression of religion. Therefore, the current open space for publication, translation and distribution of religious materials throughout the country are another area that great change has occurred in. Thus, the delivery of these materials, particularly the Holy Bible and the Holy Qur'an in local languages by the two principal faiths have played tremendous role to religious revivalism which in turn instigate competitions among religious groups.

In the era of globalization no religion is protected from external influence. From the very beginning, the Christian highland community has been influenced by western religious ideology since the fourth century and to the contrary, Jimma had been affiliated to the Middle East countries since the introduction of Islam in Gibe region particularly during the reign of Abba Jifar II after the second half of 19th century. Hence, as the current

real situation of Jimma Zone reveals, there is strong relationship between Christianity (particularly Protestantism) and western missionaries which have been working on both development work and evangelism under the name of “Hullentenawi Agelglot”. On the other hand, the main propagator of Islam (the *Wahabbiyya*) has been encouraged by Middle East countries. These two parallel linkages of Christianity and Islam from Jimma to the West and Middle East countries, respectively, have brought Jimma under the arena of west-east religious ideology struggling for supremacy.

Above all, the current advanced means of communication and information exchanges technologies, which enable the movement of people and flow of information crossing the boundary, have their own contribution to promote socio-religious controversies and conflicts in the study area.

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