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# Anti-Orthodox Christian Attitudes in Ethiopia: An Assessment of Historical and Contemporary Persecutions of Christians

## Abstract

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, one of the world's oldest Christian churches, is home for invaluable contributions to the Christian world. Despite of this, the church has countered various challenges leashed from external and internal agents. This paper assesses the lenges from historical and contemporary contexts, with their subsequent impacts upon the church and its members. Historically, expansion of Islam across the Red Sea, systematic



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intrigues of the Catholic missionaries, and invasion of Italians, among others, were chronic external challenges that have brought huge destruction on the church's spiritual and material legacies and lives of its Christians. Internal troubles such as the conquests of Yodit and Ahmad *Gragn* also have countless destruction on the church. Contemporarily, anti-Orthodox Christian views emanating from internal ethnic politics, sometimes accompanying with Islamic extremist movements, have been profoundly affecting the church from different dimensions. These hatred views, sometimes locking the church with sophistry historical events are threatening its survival and security of its members particularly who lives as minorities. Until this day, massacre, displacement, oppression and harassment of Christians and burning of churches and prohibition of public Christian ceremonies are frequent adversities of Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia. As a response of these troubles, understanding the past contextually, ensuring the prevalence of rule of law and maintaining peace, enhancing the church's administrative structure, empowering Orthodox Christian youth associations, creating active engagement of all Orthodox Christians in the affairs of the church are some of the important issues to be emphasized by the church and the government as per their respective roles.

### Keywords

Ethiopian Orthodox Church, persecutions, historical challenges, contemporary challenges

## **1 Introduction: An Overview of History and Contribution of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church**

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), also the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church (EOTC), one of the oldest Christian Churches, is the biggest of the Oriental Orthodox Churches.<sup>1</sup> The history of EOC traces back to the introduction of Christianity into the Horn of Africa that had a contact with the Middle East in particular and the Roman Empire in general. The Ethiopian Eunuch (locally known as Bakos, a treasurer of the Ethiopian Queen, Candace), on his way from Jerusalem to his country, got baptism by Apostle Philip.<sup>2</sup> The Eunuch's baptism has bridged EOC with the early form of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> At this time, the Eunuch introduced Christianity at least to his Aksumite relatives including the Queen.<sup>4</sup> It is also stated that few apostles such as Matthew had preached the gospel in Ethiopia. Few Ethiopians also had a contact with Christ's fellowships in Jerusalem. As a result of this, since the apostolic period, Christianity stretched its way to the Horn of Africa and Christians were there in main trading centers of the Aksumite Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Philip F. Esler, *The Early Christian World*. Volume I-II (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 336; David Appleyard, Ethiopian Christianity, in: Ken Parry (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, pp. 117-134 (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> Acts, 8.27-39.

<sup>3</sup> J. Thachuparamban, African Christianity: A living and vibrant repository of Christian faith- Part I. *Fronteiras, Recife*, 1/1 (415-430) (2018), p. 418.

<sup>4</sup> Francesco Alvarez, *Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia: During the Years 1520-1527* (trans. Lord Stanley of Alderley) (London: the Hakluyt Society, 1881), p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Otto Meinardus, A Brief history of the abunate of Ethiopia. *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 58, 39-65 (1962), p. 39;

relation to this, the EOC entails "a uniquely African Christianity that traces its ancestry directly to early Church traditions, rather than arriving via European Catholic and Protestant missionaries."<sup>6</sup>

Christianity attained its foothold in the Horn of Africa during the reign of Ezana and Saizana, in the 4th century A.D. This development was accompanied by Frumentius (*Abba Selama*) who was anointed by the Coptic Patriarch, Athanasius, to see the Ethiopian Christian Empire.<sup>7</sup> Following the royals' conversion, Christianity became state religion continuing as a main scenario of Ethiopian monarchy until the *Derg* regime ousted Emperor Haile Sellasie from power in 1974.<sup>8</sup> In this scenario, as it was common anywhere in the Christian world, church and state in Ethiopia had close relationship.<sup>9</sup> However, this relationship does not necessarily refer to the contemporary mystification that adhere the Christianization of Ethiopia as forceful imposition and decree of the state.<sup>10</sup> However, official adoption of Christianity and subsequent church-state relationship facilitat-

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Sergew Hable Sellasie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: United Printers, 1972), p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> J. R. Kurtz, Debating the Language of African Literature: Ethiopian Contributions, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 19/2 (187-205) (2007), p. 188.

<sup>7</sup> Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, pp. 98-103; C. Haas Mountain Constantines: The Christianization of Aksum and Iberia. *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 1/1 (101-126) (2008), pp. 101-126.

<sup>8</sup> Paul B. Henze *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> See details under Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> Wudu Tafete, Church, Nation and State: The Making of Modern Ethiopia, 1926-1991-A Research proposal. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 1/1(89-103) (2003), p. 90.

ed internationalization of the Ethiopian state, particularly its mutual contact with the Byzantine Christian Empire.<sup>11</sup>

Christianity deeply expanded into the Aksumite Empire in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The process of Christianization was accompanied with the coming into Aksum of the Byzantium monastic saints (the Nine Saints). The saints left Byzantium for Ethiopia due to the persecution they faced following the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Ethiopian Christianity continued to flourish throughout the empire during the reign of the two famous rulers, Kaleb and Gebre Meskel in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. In this period, the mission of the church reached as far as South Arabia where a short lived Aksumite Christian rule was set up following Kaleb's military expedition to rescue the Christians of Najran and San'a from Jewish persecution. Monasticism flourished in the main monastic centers such as Debre Damo. The rise of St. Yared also led the foundation of the living liturgical practices of EOTC.<sup>12</sup>

However, this golden age of Aksumite Christianity gradually declined as a result of internal troubles (such as the overriding of the Bejja tribes and the conquest of Yodit) and external agents particularly the expansion of Islam along the Red Sea coast since the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>13</sup> This situation had weakened and obscured Christian Ethiopia from the Christian world for some periods. Despite of this, Ethiopian Christianity revived under the Zagwe dynasty (between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries) that is mostly known by its contribution of the famous

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<sup>11</sup> David Appleyard, *Ethiopian Christianity*, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, pp. 115-126, 161-174; David Appleyard, *Ethiopian Christianity*, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, pp. 44-46.

rock-hewn of churches of Lalibela to the world community.<sup>14</sup> Since the 13th century, monasticism enormously revived and Christianity made its expansion to the central and southern parts of the country. The establishment of prominent monasteries like Haik Estifanos, Debre Libanos and Debre Gol has long lasting contribution in the history of Ethiopian Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Generally speaking, the deep evangelization process until the 16th century is the base for the current Christian landscape of Ethiopia. Its legacy is vividly evidenced in numerous living monasteries and churches and the presence of millions of Orthodox Christians whose religious and socio-cultural experiences have been shaped by Orthodox Christian virtue. This contribution was made by devoted monks, hermits, Christian kings and lay Christians even in the absence of Egyptian bishops. There is no country like Ethiopia where thousands of churches and monasteries have been established and flourished, just indicating the deep-rooted history and practice of Ethiopian Christianity.<sup>16</sup> From the EOC's past, we have already inherited both worldly riches and spiritual significances that are manifested in terms of art, architecture, literature, painting, spiritual education, and environmental preservation and rural develop-

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<sup>14</sup> Tekeste Negash, The Zagwe Period and the Zenith of Urban Culture in Ethiopia, ca. 930-1270 A.D. *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, 61/1 (120-137) (2006); Mengistu Gobezie, *Lalibela: A museum of living rocks* (Addis Ababa: Master Printing Press, 2012); J. Mercier, C. Lepage, *Lalibela: Wonder of Ethiopia* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 156-174.

<sup>16</sup> Jeronimo Lobo, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, edited by Henry Morley and translated by Samuel Johnson (Birmingham, 1735), p. 38.

ment.<sup>17</sup> As a church of Africa, the EOC became inspirational ideology and symbol of liberty of Pan-Africanism, blacks' struggle against white colonialism, and reference of foundation of early and modern form of ecclesiastical realm and vernacularisation of African theology, possessing the early form of inculcated African Christianity.<sup>18</sup> It firmly motivated blacks to confidentially follow Christianity by drifting it from the context of colonialism. In relation to this, different indigenized black African churches have been established.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the church is proud for its preservation of religious and cultural features of ancient Judaism that today is partly manifested in terms of art, architecture and ritual and social practices of Christians. The church is well informed to preserve

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<sup>17</sup> David Buxton, *The Christian antiquities of northern Ethiopia*. *Archaeologia*, 92, pp. 1–42 (1947); G. Gerster *Churches in Rock: Early Christian Art in Ethiopia* (London: Phaidon Press, 1970); Ashenafi Kebede, *The Sacred Chant of Ethiopian Monotheistic Churches: Music in Black Jewish and Christian Communities*, *The Black Perspective in Music*, 8/1 (20-34) (1980); R. Grierson (ed.) *African Zion: the Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, 1-4 (Yale University Press, 1993); David W. Phillipson, *Ancient churches of Ethiopia: Fourth-fourteenth centuries* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2009); Chaillot, Christiane, *Traditional Teaching in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, in: Svein Ege, Harald Aspen, Birhanu Teferra, Shiferaw Bekele (eds.), *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, pp. 527-533 (Trondheim, 2009); Alemayehu Berihanu, *Relevance of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church Institutional Setup for Rural Development (The Case of East Gojam Dioceses)*, MA Thesis. (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Ugbo O. Kalu, *African Christianity: an African Story*. (Pretoria: University of Pretoria Press, 2005), p. 264

<sup>19</sup> Albert Adu Boahen (ed.), *General History of Africa-VII: Africa under Colonial Domination, 1880-1935*. (UNESCO: University of California Press, 1985), p. 146; Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991*, Second Edition (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2002), p. 82.

such elements because these are biblical and not contrary to Christianity. This means that it has a tradition to Christianize and sanctify in the context of Christianity. Above all, some forms of Jewish practices like circumcision are clearly shared as socio-cultural practices not as mandatory religious activities. For the EOC, it is "a very conscious preservation of an ancient Christian custom, and as such respected."<sup>20</sup>

As a religious institution, EOTC is led by its Holy Synod, the highest authoritative body of the church. The synod has members of bishops, headed by a patriarch. The consecration of a patriarch was started in 1959 when *Abune* Basiliyos was consecrated as the first patriarch of the church. Until this period, despite of its numerous followers and its coverage of large area, bishops were sent from the Coptic Church for centuries.<sup>21</sup> A centralized administrative structure is organized into Parish Council Organization Department and the Ecclesiastical Administrative Council Department. The administrative structure is already pointed out in its *Kale Awadi*.<sup>22</sup>

Despite of its achievements, the history of EOC is characterized by obstructions appeared as a result of external and internal intrigues, wars and conflicts. It also is being challenged by problems stemmed from internal ethno-nationalism and political movements that affect the church and its followers in one or another way. Several literatures of missionaries, colonialists and, since recent times, Ethiopian ethno-nationalists are mis-

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<sup>20</sup> Ernst Hammerschmidt, Jewish Elements in the Cult of the Ethiopian Church, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 3 /2 (1-12) (1965), p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Wudu Tafete, The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian State and the Alexandrian See: Indigenizing the Episcopacy and forging National Identity, 1926-1991, PhD Dissertation (University of Illinois, 2006), pp. 204-205.

<sup>22</sup> Alemayehu Berihanu, Relevance of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, pp. 13, 46.



representing, defaming and disestablishing the church. These practices have their own consecutive impacts to the extent of destroying its religious and cultural values and institutional base in Ethiopia and threatening its unity, followers and role that the church has to play at national and global levels. Since the disposal of the Derg regime by the ethnic based government (led by Tigray's People Liberation Front, TPLF) in 1991, persecution and massacre of Christians and burning of churches to ash caused by escalated ethnic politics are frequent problems of the church in different areas.

The aim of this paper is to assess the roots and developments of the challenges and their subsequent consequences reached on the church. These are discussed precisely orienting into historical and contemporary challenges. The historical challenges are quietly coined to discuss on the historical aspects categorizing into their external and internal contexts. Whereas, the contemporary challenges intended to canvass existing anti-Orthodox Christian views associated with ethno-political awry that have been exercised in Ethiopia. Historical or contemporary internal problems related to administrative abuses and religious controversies within the church are not treated here for that these issues need to be seen in a distinct perspective. This paper will significantly ignite the church to pay attention for its encountering challenges contextually in the past and now to adjust its role coping with contemporary and any unexpected forthcoming problems in all aspects. To that end, different published books and articles and reliable internet sources (social media and electronic magazines) in relation to the issue raised are analysed.

## **2 Historical (External) Challenges of the Church and the Impacts Thereof**

Historically, the main external challenges of the EOC were mainly associated with the expansion of Islam along the Red Sea, the intrigues of European missionary activities and military conquest of foreign powers, which are briefly explained as follow.

### **2.1 The Expansion of Islam into Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa**

The expansion of Islam into Ethiopia and the Horn initially took place smoothly. The first contact was started when Prophet Mohammad send some of his fellowships to Aksum to escape the persecution of the Quraysh tribes of Mecca. The information he got about the hospitability of the Aksumite people and the reputation of the Aksumite king in rescuing the Christians of Najran in South Arabia convinced him Aksum also would rescue his followers. However, the asylum-seekers had no intention to expand the new religion in this great Christian Empire, even some of them were converted into Christianity.<sup>23</sup>

Since the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D, main trading outlets of Aksum along the Red Sea became under the control of the Arab traders and settlers. This situation secured the penetration of Islam into the eastern interior parts of Ethiopia and the Horn where Muslim sultanates began to evolve there. On contrary, the Aksumite Empire and its Christianity gradually assumed declining until it has been revived during the Zagwe dynasty. The gradual expan-

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<sup>23</sup> J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 44-46; Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, p.181; Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994), p. 8.

sion of Islam into this area blocked the relationship between Christian Ethiopia, Europe and Middle East until the contact was resumed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup>

The isolation of Christian Ethiopia could also be associated with the establishment of Islamic rule in other areas such as Egypt. Islamic rulers in Egypt had tendency to control Nile River that dominantly originated from Ethiopian highlands. On the other side, Ethiopia's source of bishop was Egypt. For many times, the request of bishops from Coptic Church was thwarted by the Muslim rulers mainly in relation to their interest on the river. Moreover, Muslims of the Middle East had interest along the Red Sea which was the main commercial route of Ethiopian empire. Developments in relation to these contexts had sketched Christian Ethiopia as enemy of Islam and a country of infidels that presumed to blockade the expansion of Islam in Africa.<sup>25</sup> However, Ethiopia was temporarily escaped the Islamic jihad because of two main reasons. Firstly, the kindness of Ethiopians made to the asylum seekers of the prophet remained as owe to the Arab Muslims. The virtue of the Ethiopians in relation to this kindness was extolled in the Islamic world. In this regard, the word of the prophet, "leave the Abyssinians alone" played an important role. Secondly, the early Arab Muslims were already informed about the heroic power of Ethiopian kings in rescuing Arabian Christians from persecution (the

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<sup>24</sup> J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p.43; Nehemia Levtzion, Randtzzl L. Pouwels, Patterns of Islamization and varieties of religious experience among Muslims of Africa, in: Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels (eds.), *The History of Islam in Africa*, pp. 1-20 (USA: Ohio University Press, 2000), pp. 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> Haggai Erlich, *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt and the Nile*. (UK: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), pp.23-30.

military expedition of King Caleb) which informed them to exclude Ethiopia from the jihad.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, there were some incursions arose from the eastern Muslim Sultanates grown in the eastern part of Ethiopia. However, it was in the 16th century that an Islamic jihad was employed against Christian Ethiopia. This jihad was led by Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim Aligazi (Ahmad *Gragan*- the left handed in short) supported by the military and ideology support of the Ottoman Turkish. This issue, from its internal context, is discussed under the internal challenges of the church, presented at the end of this section. Nevertheless, as militant Islamic powers grown, "leave the Abyssinians alone" did not long guaranteed Christian Ethiopia to escape the jihad. However, despite of the huge cost it has paid, Christian Ethiopia surprisingly defended itself from the threat and it remained "a bastion of African Christianity," protector of Christian minorities in Muslim dominating areas such as Egypt.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.2 The Intrigues of Catholic Missionaries

The Catholic Church attempted to intervene with in the EOC via its missionaries who reached the country in different times. The church had intention to establish a relationship with the Ethiopian Church since 15th century. The Ethiopian delegations represented at the Catholic religious conference of Florence in 1441 can be an important show for the start of the relation-

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<sup>26</sup> J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p. 46; Jon Abbink, An historical-anthropological approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of identity and politics. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 11/2 (109-124) (1998), p. 111; Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, p. 43; Haggai Erlich, *The Cross and the River*, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How it Died* (Harper Collins Publishers, 2008), pp. 56, 134.

ship.<sup>28</sup> As the Portuguese Catholic Kings sought economic interest in East Africa and the Indian Ocean, the Roman church strengthened its relationship with EOC. They understood that the Ottoman Turkish's territorial expansion towards this region would be obstacle for their interest. At the same time, the frequent raiding of Islamic warriors was a serious problem for the Ethiopian empire. Understanding, thus, was taken on both sides to establish a relationship to culminate the danger of Islamic expansion in this region. This relationship was accompanied by the exchange of Portuguese and Ethiopian missions in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.<sup>29</sup> The mission delegation led by Francesco Alvarez (that stayed in Ethiopia from 1520 to 1526) was very significant in providing clear information to Europe about Ethiopian Empire and its great Christian king, Prester John, envisioned in Europe.<sup>30</sup> In order to collaboratively fight Ahmad *Gragn* and the Ottomans, the Portuguese Catholic kings sent a military provision led by Christopher da Gama, the son of Vasco da Gama.<sup>31</sup>

Subsequently, the interest of the Catholic Church to get involvement in the Ethiopian church began to have been grown. The Jesuit missionaries had a plan "to make religious capital out of the atmosphere of Aksumite-Portuguese friendship."<sup>32</sup> However, in order to realize this aspiration, the project they de-

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<sup>28</sup> Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, p. 109.

<sup>29</sup> Herbert Thurston, *Abyssinia and Its Jesuit Missionaries. Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 24/95(353-365) (1935), p. 356; Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, p. 86; Carol Ann Gillespie, *Ethiopia* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2003), p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*. (USA: University of California Press, 1994), p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Carol Ann Gillespie, *Ethiopia*, p. 23.

signed could not be able to be easily accomplished as they wished due to the resistance faced from Ethiopian Christians. As a result of this, in order to gain support from European Catholic monarchs, the Catholic Church and its missionaries and even travelers tried to disguise and demoralize the old-age Ethiopian church in different ways in different ways.

One of these ways, as it was vividly advocated by the missionaries such as Pedro Paez, Jeronimo Lobo, Henry Stern and Lady Herbert among others, was confined with the advocacy of the Ethiopian church as "monophysite," a heretic term which most missionaries and travelers (even modern scholars) used to identify the Oriental Orthodox churches for their rejection of the Council of Chalcedon. With a poor understanding of the religious and historical aspect of the Ethiopian Church, the missionaries assumed that the early form of monasticism and Christianity had an adherent of Catholicism, The Catholics also disguised the monastic practice of Ethiopians and accused the Church as it "have almost destroyed all traces of Christianity."<sup>33</sup> The history that the church claimed to trace its early Christianity with the apostolic period is definitely denied in order to assume it heresy that cut off its religious affinity with Roman Catholicism.<sup>34</sup>

In order to validate their occupation of the Ethiopian church, the missionaries also accused it as infant "daughter" of the Coptic Church that they considered as their contradictory church. This assumption was developed in order to ascertain that the

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<sup>33</sup> Lady Herbert, *Abyssinia and Its Apostle* (London: Levey and Co. Printers, 1867), pp. 7, 10; D. H. Moore, Christianity in Ethiopia, *Church History*, 5/3(271-284) (1936), p. 276; M. A. Doughty, The Church, in: Ethiopia Today, *Blackfriars*, 38/445 (150-154) (1957), p. 150.

<sup>34</sup> Laurence Kent Patterson, The Ethiopian Church, *The Irish Monthly*, 63/748 (626-630) (1935), p. 626.

denying of the Ethiopian Church of the Chalcedon Council was due to the influence of Coptic Church. In addition to this, it seems to cut off the apostolic relationship of EOC that the church adheres for it. For this purpose, they denied the history of the church before the 4th century A.D. The EOC's rejection of the Council of Chalcedon is also taken as a point that cut the church from Catholic Church. However, there was no catholicize religious contact between the two churches. Moreover, the Catholic missionaries assumed that the "zealous" Nine Saints introduced "heretic" character into the EOC.<sup>35</sup> They also libeled that the church's attachment to the Gospel is degraded.<sup>36</sup> The other important way of missionaries' dissuasion of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was the employment of misleading expression of Judaism character of the EOC. The missionaries were active in advocating Judaism features of the EOC as bad elements.<sup>37</sup> In his accounts, Jeronimo Lobo, poorly explained the Christianity of Ethiopia as follow:

"The Christianity professed by the Abyssins [Abyssinians] is so corrupted with superstitions, errors, and heresies, and so mingled with ceremonies borrowed from the Jews, that little besides the name of Christianity is to be found here...".<sup>38</sup>

The main point of accusing the EOC was the church's resistance and active response for the intrigues of European missionaries and colonialists. For instance, Henry Stern who came in to conflict with Emperor Tewodros, by understanding the failure of his mission, has misinterpreted that all Judaic elements of the

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<sup>35</sup> Laurence Kent Patterson, *The Ethiopian Church*, p. 626.

<sup>36</sup> Henry A. Stern, *Wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia*. (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1862), p. 304.

<sup>37</sup> Ernst Hammerschmidt, *Jewish Elements*, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Jeronimo Lobo, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, p. 30.

church are its religious creed. On the other hand, in order to extol their sanctification of ordination and as a way of camouflaging the EOC's ordination or the holy order case, missionaries such as Stern defined the EOC priests as selfish and ignorant of the word of God.<sup>39</sup> The missionaries also were accusing the church with issue related to slavery. In relation to this, Lord Noel-Buxton, for instance, alleges that "in regard to the support given by the Abyssinian Church to slavery, it was generally held that slavery had been decreed by Jehovah and was therefore a perfectly legitimate institution."<sup>40</sup>

The approach of the Catholic Church in Ethiopia had not only religious concern but also political and economic interests. It was because that the church already had this experience since it had established and exercised ruling of a Catholic Papal State that was directly controlled by the Roman Papacy. The Roman Catholic Church had already established and exercised this system since the 8th century A.D. In this situation, the Papacy had both spiritual and political power to rule a territory that made the Vatican City its legitimate heir in Italy.<sup>41</sup> As a result of the Reformation movement in Europe, the Catholic Church began to have been declined. In order to revive its dominancy, the church began to look at other opportunity beyond the Mediterranean Sea particularly in Africa, India and Latin America. For this purpose, the church organized missionaries called the Jesu-

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<sup>39</sup> Henry A. Stern, *Wanderings among the Falashas*, p. 304; Laurence Kent Patterson, *The Ethiopian Church*, p. 628.

<sup>40</sup> Lord Noel-Buxton, *Slavery in Abyssinia*, *International Affairs*, 11/4 (512-526) (1932), p. 523.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph M. Woods, *The rise of the Papal States up to Charlemagne's Coronation*, *The Catholic Historical Review*, 7/1 (44-54) (1921), p. 44; N. S. Davidson *Temporal power and the vicar of Christ: The Papal State from 1450 to 1650*, *Renaissance and Modern studies*, 36/1 (1-14) (1993), pp. 1-2.



its, or "The Society of Jesus" who had aim of establishing Roman Catholic hegemony in the rest of the world and worked towards the achievement of this goal.<sup>42</sup> Through these agents, the Papacy exercised a direct political and religious engagement including landholding in the aforementioned areas such as in Latin America.<sup>43</sup> The Roman Catholic Church, as it witnessed declining to continue its influence in Europe, had also a dream to establish its kingdom in Sub-Saharan Africa. "Civilizing" the African continent was their instrumental mission to subjugate Africans.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, their interest in Ethiopia could partly be motivated by political and economic interests. In this situation, the Roman church-state complexity was not comparable with the Ethiopian church-state scenario. The Roman church had its own territory and strong political engagement, whereas, the Ethiopian church had somehow nominal relationship with state which need the church mainly for blessing of the kingship and the crown.

The systematic intriguing involvement of the Catholic Church into the EOC in order convert the church to its politico-religious tradition had brought huge crises and problems on the internal unity of the church and its followers. The crises were serious particularly during the reign of King Susnyos (r.1607-1632). In this time, Pedro Paez and Alfonso Mendez won trust of the few

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<sup>42</sup> Elias Kiptoo Ngetich, Catholic counter-reformation: a history of the Jesuits' mission to Ethiopia 1557-1635, *UNISA, Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 1-12 (2016), pp. 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> Ronnie Glantz Harrington, *The Political Postures of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America with Specific Reference to Colombia and Chile*, Master's Thesis (University of Massachusetts, 1977).

<sup>44</sup> J. J. Carney, The Catholic Church and postcolonial politics in Central Africa, in: Elias Kifon Bongmba (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa*, pp. 365-384 (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 366.

kings and royal members. The typical output of this systematic approach was the public conversion of King Susnyos into Catholicism. The king's conversion was motivated by personal moral characters of the Jesuits, not by doctrinal motivation. This conversion was followed by a short lived officialization of Catholicism as state religion of the empire. This situation instigated mass Orthodox Christians into active resistance in which thousands of Orthodox Christians lost their lives.<sup>45</sup>

The persecution and killing of the Christians was partly hastened as a result of Alfonso Mendez's intolerant activity and aversion attitude towards any religious and socio-cultural practices of Orthodox Christians as well as his forceful imposition of Roman Catholic tradition on the Orthodox Christians.<sup>46</sup> Females such as Wolete Petros, Wolete Pawulos and Fikrte Kirstos were active in defending the church by withstanding the persecution they faced from the king and the missionaries.<sup>47</sup> The persecution was ended when Susnyos proclaimed Fasiledes his successor by understanding the crises occurred in relation to his conversion and the invasion of Oromos in Gojjam.<sup>48</sup> Above all, despite of the expelling of the missionaries by King Fasiledes, their religious infringements left in the country remained backache religious controversies and conflicts in the consecutive

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<sup>45</sup> D. H. Moore, *Christianity in Ethiopia*, pp. 280-281; Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, pp. 96-98.

<sup>46</sup> Herbert Thurston, *Abyssinia and Its Jesuit Missionaries*, p. 364; Yolande Mara, *The Church of Ethiopia: A National Church in the Making* (Asmara Publisher, 1972), p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Selamawit Mecca, Hagiographies of Ethiopian female saints: with special reference to Gädlä Krestos Sämra and Gädlä Feqertä Krestos, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 18/2 (153-167) (2006), pp. 160-61, 2006, pp. 160-61.

<sup>48</sup> Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, p. 98.

periods (i.e *Qibat* and *Tsega*) to the Orthodox Church.<sup>49</sup> One of these religious tracks, *Qibat*, is a controversial issue within the Church in few areas. Here, the prejudice of the Roman Catholic Church towards the EOC could partly be associated with stereotyped attitude of Europeans towards black Africans. The practice of Christianity without the intervention of western whites was perceived as going on through incorrect pathway. The credentials of the earliest form of African Christianity (including survived Coptic and the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity) was assumed skeptically by the missionaries, considering the Christians of these churches as strangers and arrogance and their Christianity far from God's kingdom.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the missionaries' squinty view towards the EOC was part of Europeans denial of African civilization (including religious practices) as "awkward, savage, and irrational."<sup>51</sup>

The intrigue of the Roman Catholic Church upon EOC was revived in the 19th century but it faced interruption for the second time following the Italians' dramatic defeat at Adwa in 1896. Later on, the interest of the church resumed as the Italian Fascist regime assumed revenge to invade Ethiopia. As Mikre Sellasie (2010 E.C: 11-34) compiles, the Catholic Church officially blessed Fascist's invasion of Ethiopia and congratulated the soldiers' triumph in battle. The church's involvement in Ethiopia had, therefore, pro-colonialism and racist characters which were part of European colonial practices. In different African countries, missionaries and colonial agents had installed racial categorization of African societies such as Tutsi

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<sup>49</sup> Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, p. 301; Saheed A. Adejumobi, *The History of Ethiopia* (Greenwood Press, London, 2007), p. 23.

<sup>50</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, p. 146.

<sup>51</sup> A. Babo, "Civilization" and "Mission." *Soc*, 54, 124-125 (2017), p. 124.

and Hutu in Rwanda. This racial approach of the church had finally contributed for the ethnic genocide of Rwanda in the 1990s (Longman 2010). Likewise, the Roman Catholic missionaries and colonial agents attempted operation of ethnicization among the Ethiopian people; anti-Abyssinian (Orthodox Christians) attitude was installed and publicized.<sup>52</sup>

### **2.3 Military Conquests and Wars of Foreign Powers**

Ethiopia, a country that has a long history of empire formation in Africa, was engaged in defending itself from foreign conquests and wars launched by British, Egypt, Sudan and Italy. The military expedition of British under Robert during the reign of Emperor Tewodros, in 1860, had its own problem for the modern state that was resuscitating from the political turmoil of Zemene Mesafint. The impact of the conquest on the church also was not minor. The aspiration of the emperor to rebuild and modernize the country entered him in to a conflict with British due to his imprisonment of the missionaries (including Henry Stern) and consuls. Robert Napier's military expedition did end with the suicide of the energetic emperor and the dispersal of the military.<sup>53</sup>

The impact of the conquest on the EOC also was not minor issue. It was resulted with pillaging and robbing of numerous sacred treasures and royal properties which were stored at Mekdela. At this time, the treasury and church of Mekdela Madhane Alem were broken and robbed.<sup>54</sup> The militarists were

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<sup>52</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Waugh in Abyssinia*. (London, New York, and Toronto: Longmans, 1936), pp. 25-26.

<sup>53</sup> Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Pankhurst, Ethiopia, the Aksum obelisk, and the return of Africa's cultural heritage, *African Affairs*, 98 (229-239) (1999), pp. 230-232.

accompanied by antiquarians such as Richard Holmes who was appointed for the collection of antiquities during the expedition.<sup>55</sup> They partitioned and took away the treasures as booty as they could be able to logistic (it is reported that 15 mules and more than 200 elephants were used for transporting the looted antiquities) and the remaining which became beyond their capacity to handle was set on fire. The city of Mekdela was also burned to ash. Most of these looted treasures are found in British museums. One of the precious treasures looted during this occasion was *Kurate R'esu*, a unique painting icon of Gonderine emperors. After being stolen, its history is like a tragedy in such that it has been purchased and owned by different individuals in different countries; until recently it was presented in Colombia under private ownership.<sup>56</sup>

The other foreign challenge came up from the Egyptian military expedition in the 1870s. This expedition which was shortly collapsed at Gura and Gundet by the military tactics of Emperor Yohannes IV had not only economic and political interests but also mission of Islamization that would be a serious threat to Ethiopian Christianity.<sup>57</sup> The EOC also had encountered threat from Sudanese Mahdists, agents of Allah and Islamic and political revivalist of Sudan. This movement became a threat of Ethiopia following the Hiwot Treaty (1884) made between Yohan-

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *The history of the Kwer'ata Re'esu: an Ethiopian icon*, *African Affairs*, 81/322 (117-125) (1982), p. 120.

<sup>56</sup> Henry M. Stanley, *Coomassie and Magdala* (London: Samson Low, Marston, Low and Searle, 1874), pp. 459-467; Rita Pankhurst, *The library of Emperor Tewodros*, pp. 15-42; idem, *The History of Kwer'ata Re'esu*, pp. 120-121; idem, *Ethiopia, the Aksum Obelisk*, pp. 230-232; idem, *The library of Emperor Tewodros II at Mäqdäla (Magdala)*, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 36/1 (15-42) (1973), pp. 15-42; idem, *The history of the Kwer'ata Re'esu*, pp. 117-125.

<sup>57</sup> Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 50-52.

nes IV and British on the affair of Egyptians who tried to occupy Sudan.<sup>58</sup> During the movement Ethiopian Christians were already identified as infidels or “Cross worshipers.”<sup>59</sup> The Mahdists burnt churches like Mahbere Sellasie, one of the well-known monasteries in North-Western Ethiopia.<sup>60</sup>

Though Ethiopians had successfully wiped-out the Italian colonial ambition at Adwa in 1896, after forty years of preparation, the Italians appeared to take a revengeful attack on Ethiopia between 1936 and 1941. These periods were of unusual atrocities for Ethiopians in general and the Ethiopian church in particular. The Fascist state terrorized Ethiopians by employing mustard-gas and bombs.<sup>61</sup> The atrocities on Ethiopians were brought to the international community through the League of Nations (Ethiopia was member of it) that remained a toothless dog to give response for the clarions of Ethiopians and world communities against the inhuman action of the Italians.<sup>62</sup>

During their five years of unstable occupation, the EOC became the main target of the Italians who considered it their core enemy partly because of its active opposition of their invasion. The impact was twofold: loss of life Christians and destruction and pillaging of Christian antiquities. Terrorism was opened against the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In addition to languish-

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<sup>58</sup> Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, p. 148; Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 57-59.

<sup>59</sup> Iris Seri-Hersch Confronting a Christian neighbor: Sudanese representations of Ethiopia in the early Mahdist period, 1885-89, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41/2 (247-267) (2009), p. 254.

<sup>60</sup> Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Layer*, p. 156.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, pp. 216-220; Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 153-163.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Pankhurst, Italian Fascist War Crimes in Ethiopia: A History of their Discussion, from the League of Nations to the United Nations (1936-1940), *Northeast African Studies*, 6/1-2 (83-140) (1999), p. 83.

ing the educated generation of Ethiopia, members of the church including bishops (*Abune Petros* and *Abune Michael*) and numbers of priests, deacons, monks and others were tortured and massacred. The main victims of the Fascist terrorism were the communities of Debre Libanos.<sup>63</sup> This loss of lives marks the second massacre of the Christian communities of the monastery in its history. Terrorism was also made at Zequala Abbo Monastery and Arada Giyorgis Church.<sup>64</sup> Killing of Ethiopians was common throughout the country, but the brutal massacre of ten thousands of peoples in Addis Ababa was the worst, that scholars referred it as the "missing generation" or "elimination of intelligentsia."<sup>65</sup> On the other side, the Italian's religious policy was pro-Muslim and they provided financial and moral provisions for the Muslims which had intention of weakening the EOC and winning the support of Ethiopian Muslims.<sup>66</sup> As their historic enemy, the Italians approach towards the church was expressed by burning its churches and deteriorating its Christians. This was facilitated by retailing previous grievances as instrument of breaking the relationship between Christians and Muslims. Moreover, its role as an ideological inspiration of the black's movement against colonialism ignited the aversion of the Italian colonial agents.

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<sup>63</sup> Calvin E. Shenk, The Italian attempt to reconcile the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: The use of a religious celebrations and assistance to churches and monasteries, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 10/1(125-135) (1972), p. 125; Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>64</sup> Calvin E. Shenk, The Italian Attempt to Reconcile, p. 130.

<sup>65</sup> Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 171.

<sup>66</sup> Hussein Ahmed, Coexistence and /or confrontation? Towards a reappraisal of contemporary Ethiopia. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 36/1 (4-22) (2006), pp. 4-5, 12. Nehemia Levtzion and Randtzzll L. Pouwels, *Patterns of Islamization*, p. 14.

The revenge of the Italians was also characterized by extensive destruction, looting and exportation of Christian antiquities and royal properties partly to abolish symbols of old-age statehood of Christian Ethiopia. They were engaged in removing symbols of Christian emperors away such as the statue of Emperor Menelik II by the order of Mussolini. The exportation of the immovable Aksumite Obelisk, though it has been returned back after 60 years in 1998, is a good example to understand the ambition of the fascist to destroy the old-age Ethiopian Christian monarch. Churches of historical significance were also pillaged during the soldiers' movement against Christians. For instance, they looted Debre Libanos during the attack they opened on the monastic communities.<sup>67</sup>

### **3 Historical (Internal) Challenges of the Church and Consequent Impacts**

Historically, the main internal challenges of the EOC were mainly associated with internal troubles occurred since the decline of the Aksumite Empire. These challenges include conquests of Yodit and Ahmad Gragn, and consequent post war shambles to that extent of the fragmentation of the Ethiopian Christian Empire into different territories ruled by their own local warlords.

#### **3.1 Local Troubles and the Invasion of Yodit (Gudit)**

Internal challenges related with local troubles such as the invasion of Yodit and Bejja tribes, economic decline, and lack of spiritual guidance and absence of bishops had contributed to the decline of the Aksumite Christian Empire which was already

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<sup>67</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *Ethiopia, the Aksum obelisk*, pp. 235-238.



confronting with the expansion of Islam along the Red Sea.<sup>68</sup> These challenges had affected the EOC in one or another way; the effect related to the invasion of Yodit (Gudit) a non-Christian queen who forcefully seized power in the 9th or 10th centuries A.D was profound. Though her religious identity and motive to invade Christian Aksum are still obscured, Yodit persecuted Christians and burnt churches in and around Aksum. This was of course the earliest persecution that the EOC faced in its history.<sup>69</sup> During this trouble, the famous church of Aksum Tsion was partly damaged.<sup>70</sup>

### **3.2 The Jihad of Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim (Ahmad Gragn)**

At the earlier periods, the expansion of Islam into Ethiopia and the Horn was non-hostile and gradual; it initially had more of economic character than political and religious interests. However, later on, as Islam got its foothold in the Horn of Africa, Islamic Sultanates were emerged first along the coastal areas and then in some interior parts such as Harer and Yifat by controlling main trading outlets of the empire. This development in time ignited conflicts between these polities and the Ethiopian Christian Empire. The development of these sultanates was tolerated by the Christian rulers of Ethiopia and the relationship between the Christians and Muslims of Ethiopia was not completely antagonism; there were periods of actual collabora-

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<sup>68</sup> Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, pp. 215-224.

<sup>69</sup> Idem, The Problem of Gudit, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 10/1 (113-124) (1972), p. 113; Stuart Munro-Hay *Axum: An African Civilization of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 88; Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, pp. 48-49; Tekeste, *The Zagwe Period*, pp. 123-125.

<sup>70</sup> Sergew Hable Selassie, *The Problem of Gudit*, p. 116.

tion and peaceful coexistence. Some sporadic incursions, however, were appeared between these sultanates and the Christian kingdom mainly because of the sultanates refusal to pay tribute to the central state.<sup>71</sup>

As it has been mentioned earlier, there were some situations that temporarily protected the Ethiopian empire not to be subject for the worldwide Islamic jihad. It was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Ethiopia faced a dramatic jihad lead by Ahmad *Gragn* who appeared against Christian Ethiopia between 1529 and 1543.<sup>72</sup>

This issue here is considered as internal challenge in such that the event, despite of its international contact with the Ottoman Turks, was occurred after Islam became gradually and relatively peacefully penetrated into the Horn of Africa.

The contact that the Ethiopian Muslim principalities had with the Ottoman Islamic rulers, the domination of the militaristic Islamic members of Arab settlers and their support to the conflict against the Christian empire were some of the factors that initiated the Muslim Sultanates to draw a jihad against the Christian empire of Ethiopia. Moreover, in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Islam in the Horn of Africa became more militant that contributed to the employment of jihad as a legitimate practice to destroy areas of Christians who were considered as infidels.<sup>73</sup> The aim of the jihad to subjugate the whole region of East Africa failed partly because of poor coordination between the overseas and local Islamic powers.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Jon Abbink, *An historical-anthropological approach to Islam*, pp. 112-114.

<sup>72</sup> J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p. 46.

<sup>73</sup> Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, pp. 25-27; Levtzion and Pouwels, *Patterns of Islamization*, p. 8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 29-31.

The consequence of the jihad of Ahmad *Gragn* on Ethiopia was extremely unpleasant. It had reversed the country to rally Europe in commercial and industrial activities (Marcus 1994: 34). Nevertheless, the impact it brought upon the EOC was countless in terms of loss of life of Christians and destruction of spiritual and material culture of Christianity. This huge destruction appeared because of the ruthlessness and voraciousness of the Imam and his jihadists in killing Christians and destroying the Christian heritage. In relation to this, Tadesse Tamrat best explains the situation as follow:

Ahmad *Gragn* and his followers were dazzled at the extent of the riches of the Church, and at the splendor of Ethiopian Christian culture at the time. And, as the most important repository of the cultural heritage of Christian Ethiopia, the church was a special target for the destructive furies of the Imam.<sup>75</sup>

During the war, various Christians and clergies were massacred or forcefully converted into Islam. Others were enslaved or forced to flee from their homeland.<sup>76</sup> That is why some scholars referred this period as "holocaust" upon the Ethiopian Christians. It also had atrophied the spiritual values of the post war followers of the church.<sup>77</sup> It is also reported that those who repudiated conversion into Islam were sent for enslavement. Selling of enslaved Christians was intensified until Emperor Gelawudewos issued an edict that prohibited the enslavement

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<sup>75</sup> Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, p. 301.

<sup>76</sup> Asa J. Davis, The Sixteenth Century Jihad in Ethiopia and the impact on its culture, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2/4 (567-592) (1963), p.578; Tekle Tsadiq Mekuria *YeGragn Ahmad Worera (in Amharic)*, (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1975 E.C).

<sup>77</sup> Abraham Demoz, Moslems and Islam in Ethiopic Literature. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 10/1 (1-11) (1972), p. 6.

of Christians.<sup>78</sup> The church was also specially targeted by the raiders who terribly destroyed and plundered its rich cultural values most of which were made of gold. The destruction of the war has been thoroughly recorded under the "Futuh al Habasha" of Arab Faqih, which is now translated by Paul Stenhouse as *The Conquest of Abyssinia*.<sup>79</sup>

The cultural legacies of Christianity build over centuries have been destroyed within less than two decades.<sup>80</sup> The evidences of the destruction are still available in different parts of Ethiopia. All churches and monasteries accessed by the Muslims were destroyed and plundered. The only churches that were left in safe were the rock hewn churches of Lalibela. However, the treasures of the churches were plundered.<sup>81</sup> Churches and monasteries of Aksum, Gondar, Gojjam, Wollo and Shewa which were main centers of the Christian Empire were the main destruction target of Muslim warriors. Churches which were adorned with gold and other luxurious materials were completely destroyed to their ground and extensively exploited. Among these churches and monasteries, Debre Libanos, Zequala, Mekane Sellasie, Atrons Maryam, Gennete Giyorgis, Haiq Estifanos, Aksum Tsion Maryam, Mertu Lemaryam, were some of the well known destroyed by the Muslims. Despite of the scare sources we have, other several churches and monasteries

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<sup>78</sup> Habtamu Mengiste, The Edict of King Gälawdéwos against the Illegal Slave Trade in Christians: Ethiopia, 1548, *The Medieval Globe*, 2/2 (73-114) (2016), pp. 96-102.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Lester Stenhouse (trans.), Futuh Al-Habasha: The Conquest of Abyssinia (Futuh Al- Habasa by Sihab ad-Din Ahmad bin Abd al-Qader), (Tsehai Publishers, 2003).

<sup>80</sup> Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, p. 301.

<sup>81</sup> Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, p. 87.

built throughout the Christian empire were destroyed.<sup>82</sup> It seems like that Christian features in Shewa and Wollo were profoundly destroyed during the war. More specifically, Shewa, the center of medieval kings, was targeted by the Imam. Berara (most known to Europeans as center of the king of Prester John and the pope of Abyssinia through the map of Fra Mauro and European strangers in Medieval Ethiopia), Badeke, Entoto and others in and around Addis Ababa were completely destroyed by the Islamic raiders.<sup>83</sup>

The destruction occurred at Debre Libanos monastery was numerous. As the author of "Futuh al Habasha" reported, the church was suddenly burnt while a discussion was made between Abu Baker Qatin (the Imam's emir sent from Berara with warriors to burn the monastery) and members of the monastery to leave the church in turn of numerous treasury gifts. Not only the church was burnt but also the monastic communities were also set into fire and burned with the church. This event consist the first massacre of the communities of the monastery.

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<sup>82</sup> E. A. William Budge, *A History of Ethiopia: Nubia and Abyssinia* (London: Methuen, 1928), pp. 333-334; Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, p. 87; Franz-Christoph, Muth Ahmad b. Ibrahim al-Gazi, in: Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, 1 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), pp. 155-157; Paul Lester Stenhouse, *Futuh Al-Habasha*; Hartwig Breternitz, Richard Pankhurst, Barara, the Royal City of 15th and Early 16th Century (Ethiopia): Medieval and other Early Settlements between Wechecha Range and Mt Yerer—Results from a Recent Survey. *Annales d'Éthiopie*, XXIV, 209-249 (2009); Tsegaye Ebabey, Threats to cultural monument in Ethiopia: Based on evidences of causes and problems of some forgotten rock-cut churches, *Journal of Heritage Management*, 4/1 (85-102) (2019), pp. 94-95.

<sup>83</sup> Paul Lester Stenhouse, *Futuh Al-Habasha*, pp. 163, 165-168; Hartwig Breternitz, Richard Pankhurst, Barara, pp. 212-215; Habtamu Mengiste, *Berara- Qedamit Addis Abeba (1400-1887 E.C): Ediget, Wudmet ena Dagim Lidet* (in Amharic) (The Red Sea Press, 2020), pp. 232-238.

Such monasteries are reported to have been burnt to ash because they were understood very significant for the Christians.<sup>84</sup> In addition to the material destruction and loss of life, the jihad of Ahmad *Grag*n brought moral and social chaos that affected spiritual personalities of post war Ethiopian Christians.<sup>85</sup>

### **3.3 Shambles of the Post Ahmad's War Complexities**

There are far reaching consequences of the war that affect the empire and the church in one or another way. These were, among others, huge destruction of the life and heritage of Christians, forceful conversion of various people into Islam, the growth of imperialism and religious motives of the Portuguese and Ottoman Turkey in Ethiopia and mass migration of the Oromo pastoralist into the interior part of Ethiopia. In the aftermath of the war, the central government began to shift its center from Shewa to the area around Lake Tana, where the state showed its renaissance following the establishment of Gondar as the permanent center of the empire in 1636. Christian heritage showed revival and numbers of churches and palaces demonstrating significant Gonderine architectural, artistic and painting styles have been built.<sup>86</sup> However, the post war period until the 19<sup>th</sup> century showed decline of Christianity mainly in the southern part of the country. Moreover, shambles of the troubles during this period had affected the church's reli-

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<sup>84</sup> Paul Lester Stenhouse, *Futuh Al-Habasha*, pp. 186-187, 190-192.

<sup>85</sup> Asa J. Davis, *The Sixteenth Century Jihad in Ethiopia*, p. 591.

<sup>86</sup> Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Layer*, p. 107; Lidwien Kapteijns, Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. in: Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Puwels (eds.), *The History of Islam in Africa*, pp. 227-250 (USA: Ohio University Press, 2000), p. 230; Neill Finneran, *The Archaeology of Ethiopia* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 259.

gious mission abroad particularly in Jerusalem. The impact was to the extent that the Ethiopian communities were impoverished, waned and humiliated and the holy sites owned by them for long periods were confiscated by others due to lack of support from the Ethiopian Empire and the influence of Ottomans rule in Jerusalem.<sup>87</sup>

The concentration of the post war Christian Ethiopian Empire in the northern part of the country left a vacuum for the northward mass incursion of "pagan" Oromo pastoralists.<sup>88</sup> As Abba Bahrey (a 16<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian monk who wrote about the Oromo population movement) records show the penetration of the Oromo into the interior part of the country was not as smooth since it was anti-Christian movement. Despite of the gradual integration of the Oromos into the Christian Empire, their movement was accompanied by occupation of overridden places, destruction of remnant churches, renaming of medieval places and assimilation of subjugated peoples. Some non-Christian religious practices were also gradually adopted by Christians. In most areas occupied by the non-Christian Oromos, Christianity could not show revival until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>89</sup> Some medieval places affiliated with Christianity have been destroyed due to the mass population movement and some others surprisingly survived the influence of that move-

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<sup>87</sup> Kirsten Stoffregen Pederson, Jerusalem. In: Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, 3(273-277) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), p. 275; Tigab Bezie, The Ethiopian religious community and its ancient monastery, Die res Sultan in Jerusalem from foundation to 1850s. *Journal of Ethiopian Church Studies*, 3, 53-63 (2013), pp. 60-63.

<sup>88</sup> Paul Lester Stenhouse, Futuh Al-Habasha, p. xvii.

<sup>89</sup> Getachew Haile, *Yeabba Bahriy Dirsetoch* (in Amharic). (Minnesota, 2002), pp. 75-93; Habtamu Mengiste, *Berara- Qedamit Addis Abeba*, pp. 278-286.

ment. A best example of this is the survival of Zay Christians and monasteries in Lake Ziway. However, there is still challenge as a result of anti-Orthodox affinities on such remnants of Christian legacies. One of the islands of Lake Ziway, Debre Tsion (the Mount of Zion) is now replaced by an Oromiffa word, "Tulu Gudo."<sup>90</sup> The town of Ziway, which is known since medieval times, is also replaced with "Batu." This trend, particularly in Oromia region, covers all areas which evidenced with Christian legacies.

Nevertheless, after two centuries of relative stabilization at Gonder, the monarchy of the state faced disintegration into different territories which were ruled by their own warlords. This period is known among scholars as Zemene Mesafint (Era of the Princes, 1769-1855). It not only did expose the empire to be scouted out and approached by the sprouting western colonial aspiration and the southward expansionist Egypt but also weakened the role of the EOC in and abroad.<sup>91</sup> It also facilitated religious controversy provoked by the Catholic missionaries; it shocked the EOC at the time.<sup>92</sup>

Generally, because of the complex dynamics of post war of Ahmad *Grag*n, the concentration of the central government around Lake Tana and the political crisis of Zemene Mesafint, the church's missionary role in central and southern Ethiopia did not resumed until the 19th century. However, following the reestablishment of the empire's center in Shewa under Emper-

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<sup>90</sup> Paul B. Henze, *Lake Zeway and its Islands: An Ethiopia Lake Where a Unique Christian Culture has survived since medieval times*, *Ethiopian Observer*, XVI /2 (1973), p. 76.

<sup>91</sup> Saheed A. Adejumobi, *The History of Ethiopia*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>92</sup> Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, pp. 119 & 124; Eshetu Abate Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In George Thomas Kurian (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, pp. 1-4. First Edition (Blackwell Publishing, 2011), p. 2.



or Menelik II, the church's missionary role resumed and most of the early and medieval Ethiopia legacies (such as palaces and churches) have been discovered and rehabilitated.<sup>93</sup> One of the examples of medieval churches discovered in Addis Ababa is ruin of a square church which was built on a place which is now the church of Arada Giyorgis. An excavation on this site was conducted by Catholic missionaries and they used for their religious activity until they left it for the church of St. Giyorgis to build there.<sup>94</sup> The numerous early and medieval cultural legacies evidenced in Shewa possess the main reason for the reestablishment of the empire's center at Addis Ababa. However, this area is frequently subjected to a debate mainly by the Oromo politicians who hyped up a distinguished interest from the capital.<sup>95</sup>

#### **4 Contemporary Anti-Orthodox Christian Attitudes: Challenges of Ethno-politics**

Anti-Orthodox views that have been rooted back to the western Catholic and colonial intrigues have been widely propagated by ethno-political and religious movements which have prejudice towards the EOC. This prejudice is mainly exercised by ethnically associating the church with the Amhara people (most

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<sup>93</sup> Habtamu Mengiste, *Berara- Qedamit Addis Abeba*, pp.149-160, 410-417.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Pankhurst, Menelik and the Foundation of Addis Ababa, *The Journal of African History*, 2/1(103-117) (1961), p. 104-105; Emile Foucher Birbirsra, 1868-1869, in: Ahmed Zekaria, Bahru Zewude, Tadesse Beyen (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Symposium on the Centenary of Addis Ababa*, (Addis Ababa, 1987), pp. 35-36.

<sup>95</sup> Habtamu Mengiste, *Berara- Qedamit Addis Abeba*, pp. 427-436.

dominantly Orthodox Christians and who played a key role in state formation of Ethiopia) others who are followers of the church. Since the disposal of Emperor Haile Sellasie in 1974, the church has been subjected to a kind of trouble that has dimensional impacts up on its religious and social roles and lives of the followers. These challenges are progressed with internal ethno-political movements of 1960s and 1970s. Different ethno-centric wings have been emerged not only to dispose the Christian monarchy and later on, the Derg regime but also assuming to disestablish the EOC.<sup>96</sup> Of course, the Derg regime that adopted socialism as its sacred ideology had anti-religious approach which considerably affected the EOC. Despite of the progress of the church's religious practice at parish level, the atheistic ideology of Derg regime politically persecuted the highest officials (including murder of Patriarch Tewoflos) of the church, nationalized its properties, and condemned the church as old age wished to be collapsed.<sup>97</sup>

Ethnic based nationalism and religious fundamentalism movements have been actively opened following the disposal of the Derg regime from power by ethno-political segments led by TPLF in 1991.<sup>98</sup> In this ambitious political complexity, the Ethiopian past is politically ostracized and condemned as a wicked phenomenon. In this progress, both the Ethiopian Christian monarchy and the EOC were charged for the orchestrated past oppression and marginalization of ethnic groups. Nevertheless, denying the context of country's history in general and the EOC in particular from its local and global perspectives, fabrication

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<sup>96</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*. USA: University of California Press, 1994), p. 184.

<sup>97</sup> Wudu Tafete, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, pp. 310-338.

<sup>98</sup> Mackonen Michael, *Who is Amhara? African Identities*, 6/4 (393-4-4) (2008), p. 393.

and exaggeration of previous mistakes have been fascinated as "Gospel truth" among Ethno-centric nationalists. Such political intrigues have been employed by most political fringes particularly by those who assumed struggle to liberate Oromos and Tigrians.<sup>99</sup>

Different ethno-centric writers have been producing anti-Orthodox Church views for more than thirty years. The church is misinterpreted and misrepresented mainly by Tigrian and Oromo ethno-politicians from different aspects including its spiritual or doctrinal issues, evangelization activities, clergies and bishops, cultural legacies and the relationship it had with the state. Since the early age of their struggle against the Derg regime, the extremist TPLF ethno-political entity had a plan to dismantle the EOTC on ethnic basis. An "intelligence group" was formed to scout out the church's main monasteries and administrative structures that would help their mission's accomplishment.<sup>100</sup> At the last, the church of Ethiopia was practically divided when a Tigrian Church in line with the political ideology of TPLF was independently established at Mekele. This structure functioned until TPLF seized the central power and the church's main structure at Addis Ababa in 1991.<sup>101</sup> The squinted view of TPLF on the EOC was related with its movement

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<sup>99</sup> Harold G. Marcus, Does the Past have any authority on Ethiopia? *Ethiopian Review*, pp. 18-21 (1992), p. 20.

<sup>100</sup> Aregawi Berhe, A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (1975-1991): Revolt, Ideology and Mobilisation in Ethiopia. PhD Dissertation (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2008), p. 302.

<sup>101</sup> Ibidem, p. 303.

which was characterized by anti-Ethiopian orientation in which the EOC also was negatively portrayed.<sup>102</sup>

Under the rule of TPLF, ethnic-based prejudice on the EOC was openly practicing. The term Orthodox Tewahido (having the church's official name, EOTC) which elaborates the doctrinal nature of the church is defined as a mythical construction of the Abyssinian (Amhara and Tigrian) religion.<sup>103</sup> The God of the Orthodox Christians is perceived as "White God," an attempt to create racial difference and misleading theological perception among the Orthodox Church followers. It is also added that the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity is a borrowed one and it is "a form of devil worship."<sup>104</sup> Others also merely define the church's identity as cultural element of Abyssinians. In this perspective, the baptism and conversion of societies (except the Amhara) into Christianity is perceived as Amharaization.<sup>105</sup> Subterfuges are also made create confusion on the church's public religious ceremonies, such as the Finding of the True Cross, which is annually celebrated on September 28. Accordingly, this ceremony is a corruption of the Oromo traditional religious festival, "Malkaessa." This colorful ceremony is also

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<sup>102</sup> Paulos Milkias, Ethiopia, TPLF and Roots of the 2001 Political Tremor. *International Conference on African Development*. Archives paper 4 (2001), p. 13.

<sup>103</sup> Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia, Power and Protest: Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.36 ; Mekuria Bulcha, Genocidal violence in the making of nation and state in Ethiopia. *African Sociological Review*, 9(2), 1-54 (2005), p. 7.

<sup>104</sup> Gemechu Megersa Oromumma, Tradition, Consciousness and Identity, in: P. T. W. Baxter, Jan Hultin, Alessandro Triulzi (eds.), *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Inquiries*, pp. 92-102. (USA: The Red Sea Press, 1996), p. 97.

<sup>105</sup> Mekuria Bulcha, Genocidal violence, p. 16; Abbas H. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880-1974: The Case of the Arsi Oromo* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 2.

speculated as it has not yet been known anywhere and that "it was twisted, counterfeited and adopted into local Biblical discourse by the Orthodox Church around the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century." Here, contrary to its historical and ritual values that commenced Meskel to be one of the world heritages of Ethiopia, the ceremony is misrecognized as a fabrication of recent times.<sup>106</sup>

Orthodox Christianity is also defined as a religion of the Abyssinians (the Amharas and Tigrrians) and the church is perceived as racist for the Oromo.<sup>107</sup> In a specified manner, racial categorization between the Habeshas and others, maintaining the former as pure race, also has been taken as inherent intention of the EOC.<sup>108</sup> The evangelization process of EOC is taken to be forcefully imposed.<sup>109</sup> Allegations are also made that the harsh approach of the EOC has caused the mass conversion of the

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<sup>106</sup> Dereje Tadesse Meroe, Oromo and Old Nubian: Solving the Mystery of the Meroitic Language. (<https://www.academia.edu/5847718>) (2014), p. 42.

<sup>107</sup> Gemechu Megersa, Oromumma, p. 97; Asafa Jalata, The process of state formation in the Horn of Africa in comparative perspective. in: Asafa Jalata (ed.), *State Crises, Globalisation and National Movements in North-East Africa*, pp. 1-29 (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 99. Mekuria Bulcha, Genocidal violence, p. 16.

<sup>108</sup> Asafa Jalata, *Fighting Against the injustice of the Sate and Globalization: Comparing the African American and Oromo Movements*. (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 99.

<sup>109</sup> Seyoum Yunkura Hameso, The Sidama nation and the solidarity of colonised nations in Ethiopia, in: Asafa Jalata (ed.), *State Crises, Globalisation and National Movements in North-East Africa*, pp. 165-181 (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 177; Asafa Jalata, *Fighting Against the injustice of the Sate*, p. 120; Begna Dugassa The significance of the rights of people to self-determination to the development of public health: the Oromo experiences. *Journal of Oromo Studies*, 25/1&2 (99-128) (2018), p. 105.

people either to Islam or other forms of Christianity.<sup>110</sup> The church's spiritual mission is understood as instrument of "colonization" and "destruction of indigenous peoples."<sup>111</sup> The writers' of such views have adopted the attitudes of Catholic missionaries and colonial facilitators to create ethnicization trick to depart the church from the life other peoples such as the Oromos.<sup>112</sup> On the other hand, perception is taken that the expansion of European Christianity via colonialism was better than the way by which the Orthodox Christianity expanded.<sup>113</sup> It is also stated that EOC clergies and bishops hate the Oromos and the Oromos hate them. Accordingly, it is assumed that the Oromos' distaste towards the EOC inflicted ethnic conflicts.<sup>114</sup> Thus, for such writers, EOC is not meant more than ideological instrument of feudalism and imperial legitimacy.<sup>115</sup> For this reason, aspirations are raised for the "disestablishment" of the EOC as the monarchical state of the country has been once disposed.<sup>116</sup> In relation to this, ethno-writers have a call that invites ethnic groups such as the Oromos against EOC on the basis of past grievances, as the following statements clarify this:

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<sup>110</sup> Asafa Jalata, *Fighting against the Injustice of the State*, pp. 71 & 120; Begna, Significance of the rights of people to self-determination, pp. 66, 71, 120.

<sup>111</sup> Idem, The process of state formation in the Horn of Africa, p. 4.

<sup>112</sup> Mohammed Hassen, A Short History of Oromo Colonial Experience: Part Two, Colonial Consolidation and Resistance 1935-2000. *Journal of Oromo Studies*, 7/1&2 (109-198) (2000), p. 118.

<sup>113</sup> Abbas H. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire*, p. 117.

<sup>114</sup> Mohammed Hassen, A Short History of Oromo Colonial Experience, p. 118.

<sup>115</sup> Abbas H. Gnamo, Islam, the Orthodox Church and Oromo Nationalism (Ethiopia) (L'islam, l'Église orthodoxe et le nationalisme oromo en Éthiopie. *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 42/165, (99-120) (2002), p. 105.

<sup>116</sup> Abbas H. Gnamo, Islam, the Orthodox Church and Oromo Nationalism, p. 103.

"The Orthodox Church can hardly be proud of its past relations with the Oromo people. Abyssinian priests never came to Oromia as the messengers of God and peace. They (priests) came as conquerors with Menelik's generals, 'blessing' the massacre that the latter and their soldiers inflicted upon the Oromo People. They shared with the emperor, his generals and soldiers booties plundered from the Oromo. (...) they (the clergies) benefited from the misfortunes of the Oromo. They never worked as missionaries to spread the word of God. They used military force to baptize them in mass. They introduced no education or medical knowledge to their converts, and hence contributed nothing to Oromo welfare."<sup>117</sup>

For some writers, the EOC is a source of people's exploitation and it has negatively affected the "every facet of the rural life." The cause of poverty of the Oromos, for instance, is assumed to be related with the occupation of large proportion of land and veneration of saints by the EOC.<sup>118</sup> In relation to this, the establishment of Ethiopian Orthodox church in Oromia is "irrelevant."<sup>119</sup> Others, on the other hand, also attempt to look this in African perspective; the view that states Orthodox Christianity did nothing for the "original" Africans shows this.<sup>120</sup>

Misperception also has been attached on EOC by those who felt Muslims' marginalization in the Ethiopian past. Following the Ahmad's war, Islam continued its expansion because that the

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<sup>117</sup> Mekuria Bulcha, *Genocidal violence*, p. 11.

<sup>118</sup> Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia, Power and Protest*, p. 15; Beletech Deressa (1993). The Economic Viability of Oromia and Its Impact on the Politics of the Horn, *Journal of Oromo Studies*, 1 (1), 28-35 (1993), p. 33.

<sup>119</sup> Tadesse Beriso, The Pride of the Guji-Oromo: An Essay on Cultural Contact and Self-Esteem, *Journal of Oromo Studies*, 11/1&2 (13-27) (2004), p. 22.

<sup>120</sup> Asafa Jalata, *The process of state formation in the Horn of Africa*, p. 22.

Ethiopian state did not assume hard revenge against it.<sup>121</sup> However, the approach of emperors such as Tewodros and Yohannes IV towards Islam is taken to convince the oppression of Muslims in the past. Of course, the militaristic nature of Islam (the destruction of the Ottomans Islamic warriors in the rest of ancient Christian world), the destructive memory of the jihad of Ahmad *Gragin* in particular and the growth of neighboring Islamic threats such as the Egyptians and the Mahdists who tried creating local Ethiopian Muslim vassals against Christian Ethiopia were main reasons for the uneven relationships between Christian rulers and Muslims and the fear that associated.<sup>122</sup>

It should be noted here that, if one applies the context of the period, an immediate offensive counter attack on Muslims was expected from the emperors. The events occurred during the two emperors have been either exaggerated or misinterpreted without understanding the context of the time locally and globally. Such misinterpretations have contributed for the growth of anti-Orthodox Christian movements that progressed to the extent of religious and ethnic tensions in the country.<sup>123</sup> Imaging Christian Ethiopia as enemy of Islam had propagated until recently in the Middle East Islamic areas. In the 1980s, different radical Islamic literatures were produced in Egypt identifying Ethiopia as illegitimate state and enemy of Islam. This had contribution for the crises in Ethiopia particularly since 1991, the time when ethnic politics openly came on the scene. Accompa-

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<sup>121</sup> Kapteijns, *Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa*, p. 230.

<sup>122</sup> Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, pp. 61-62; Abbink, *An historical-anthropological approach to Islam*, p. 114.

<sup>123</sup> Jon Abbink Religious freedom and the political order: the Ethiopian 'secular state' and the containment of Muslim identity politics. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 8/3 (346-365) (2014), pp. 346-365; Dereje Feyyissa Muslims renegotiating marginality in contemporary Ethiopia. *The Muslim World*, 104 (281-305) (2014), p.284.



nying this, there have been syndromes of revival of extremist Islamic movements in the country.<sup>124</sup>

For some Islamic writers, the survival of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity with its largest followers is inconceivable. The church's old history and its rich legacies (which escaped the destruction of wars and conflicts in the past) as well as the predominant Orthodox Christian population are perceived as signs of oppression and subjugation of Muslims in Ethiopia. For this reason, some writers try conceivable this misperception by forging and adopting false premises. Some of these premises include the conversion of an Aksumite Christian king into Islam, the expansion of Islam deeply into Ethiopia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D (a time when Islam itself was not started in Mecca) and propagation of Muslims as majority group in Ethiopia (accordingly, 60 % of the total population professes of Islam).<sup>125</sup> Historically the religious identity of the seventh century Aksumite king was politically determined by TPLF authorities to be the first Ethiopian Muslim king.<sup>126</sup>

The EOC is under continuous influence of the ethno-politics and an attempt is even made to negatively portray the church in the mind of Ethiopian youths mainly through the country's education system. For instance, a "Module for History of Ethiopia and the Horn,"<sup>127</sup> a course prepared for higher education students,

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<sup>124</sup> Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, pp.17-18; Abbink, Religious freedom and the political order. p. 356.

<sup>125</sup> Seifuddin Adam Hussein Islam, Christianity and Ethiopia's foreign policy. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 17/1 (129-139) (1997), pp. 129-131.

<sup>126</sup> Abbink, An historical-anthropological approach to Islam, p. 111.

<sup>127</sup> This module has now attempted to be vigorously reviewed by different scholars (I was one of them). Despite of some unresolved arguable issues, it was validated to be given as course of higher education learners.

had a statement of false premise referring the evangelization process of the EOC was taken place by the church's monopolization of burial sites. Accordingly, this situation forced people to convert into Orthodox Christianity. However, the module, due to its serious faults and fallibilities, faced strong criticisms by scholars such as Professor Getachew Haile<sup>128</sup> and Dr. Megndistu Gobezie<sup>129</sup> and the public in social media.

The main intention of the ant-Orthodox views, whether mentioned here or not, inclines to destabilize the strong base of the EOC and to decline the bond between the church and the Ethiopian communities. Above all, the views have contributed at the ground for the persecution of Orthodox Christians mainly since 1991. The EOC has already publicized martyrdom (*Sema-etat*) of the slaughtering of various Orthodox Christians and burning of numbers of churches in different parts of Oromia between 1991 and 2007.<sup>130</sup> Persecution of Orthodox Christians, sometimes being supported by governmental structures and Islamic political extremists, were frequently occurring in different parts of Oromia, Gedeo, Somali, Sidama and Benishagul Gumuz particularly between 2017 and 2020.<sup>131</sup> Most of the insurrections in these areas seemed to be initiated because of political and mal-administrative problems or self administration questions.

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<sup>128</sup> <https://www.zehabesha.com/module-for-history-of-ethiopia-and-the-horn-of-africa-for-higher-learnings/> (Accessed on February 2/2021).

<sup>129</sup> Addis Admas (Amharic Magazine), 20, 1042, (Addis Ababa, Tahisas 25/2012 E.C), 3, 22 & 27.

<sup>130</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox Church, *YeEthiopia Orthodox Bete Kirstian Tarike Kelidete Kirstos eske 2000 E.C (in Amharic)* (Addis Ababa: Mega Printing, 2000 E.C), pp. 291-292.

<sup>131</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/amharic/45080641>;  
<https://borkena.com/2020/07/12/>;  
<https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-09-16/> (Accessed on September 7/2020); Hamer (Local Amharic magazine), 27(4), pp. 16-18, 23-24, Mahbere Kidusan 2011 E.C.

However, the insurrections gradually shifted into a direct attack on EOC and its members who completely did not have a link with the local problems and questions. The misperception that different groups have on EOTC has undoubtedly contribution for the exacerbation of such attacks. For instance, in June 2019, the quest for regional state of the Sidama Zone finally opened a direct attack on the EOC and its members; in this time Orthodox Christians were selectively persecuted and churches were burned down and sacked. Now, Sidama achieved a status of regional state but on the cost of Orthodox Christians; a historical mistake in this modern time. To add another example, the massacre of numbers of Orthodox Christians in Oromia region was worst as this was happened following the sudden murder of an Oromo musician named Hachalu Hundessa. This persecution was primarily propagated through social and private media that shifted into ethnic and religious attack selectively Orthodox Christians who had nothing relation with the killing of the artist.<sup>132</sup>

Demonstrations against the persecution of Christians were held in various towns of Amhara region, calling the government to pay attention for security of Christian and ethnic minorities in the aforementioned areas.<sup>133</sup> In addition to the persecutions of Christians, motivated by Oromo ethno-politicians, ethnic division was also ignited in Oromia region, aiming at to divide the church on the basis of ethnic line politics. Recently encouraged

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<sup>132</sup> <https://borkena.com.cdn.amproject.org/v/s/borkena.com/2020/07/12> (Accessed on February September/2020)

<sup>133</sup> <https://borkena.com/2019/09/15> (Accessed on September 7/2020); <https://eotcmk.org/e/notice-from-mahibere-kidusan-about-the-attack-on-christians-in-the-oromia-region> (Accessed on September 7/2020).

by political motivations, a group of Oromo clergies, led by Belay Mekonnen, attempted to establish an independent Oromo clergy in contrary with practices of the Holy Synod.<sup>134</sup> This ethnic division within the Orthodox Church was proposed so far by ethno-writers<sup>135</sup> and, therefore, it had support from ethno-politicians. In a general speaking, ethnicization, murdering and oppression of Christians, burning of churches, confiscation of public Christian holyday places etc are increasing from time to time partly because of the collaboration and negligence of local government authorities. In relation to this, the church's Synod has made this issue part of the discussion in its annual conferences and requesting the government to stop persecution of Christians.<sup>136</sup>

## 5 Conclusion and Recommendation

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of the world's ancient Christian churches which trace their foundation back to the early Christian era. The church constituted invaluable contributions to the country and to the world as well in terms of art, architecture, literature and calendar, moral and spiritual values. The socio-cultural and spiritual life of most Ethiopians is oriented with the church's deep engagement within the society. It is a spiritual institution which is administered by its own Synod that has been connected to parish communities through its clerical administrative structures. Despite of its contribution at

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<sup>134</sup> <https://borkena.com/2019/08/31> (Accessed on September 7/2020).

<sup>135</sup> Mekuria Bulcha, Priests, religion and language in Ethiopia: A commentary. *The Oromo Commentary*, IV/1 (8-1 1) (1994), p. 11.

<sup>136</sup> Hamer (local Amharic magazine), volume 27(7), pp. 25-26, Mahbere Kidusan, 2012 E.C.

national and global levels, the church has faced/facing various challenges can be categorized into external and internal challenges. This paper attempted to assess these challenges from their historical and contemporary contexts and with their consequent impacts reached on the church. These challenges not only have brought destruction of lives and properties and looting of part of its vast and long build religious and cultural legacies but also weakened the church's religious missionary role both at national and international levels. Some of the main external challenges that faced the church in its history were the expansion of Islam along the Red Sea, the intrigue intervention of the Catholic missionaries and wars and conquests waged by foreign powers. The subsequent impacts of these challenges were loss of Christians' life as well as looting and destruction of properties of the church.

Internally, the conquest of Yodit (Gudit) and the jihad of Ahmad *Gragn* were the main challenges of the church in the past. During these trouble events, not only the Christians lost their life and forcefully abandoned their religion but also vast of the Christian legacy have been destroyed to ash. The destruction of Ethiopian Christian legacy under Ahmad *Gragn* was countless. The Christian legacy that built over centuries was destroyed within not more than fifteen years. Contemporarily, progressing anti-Orthodox Christian views as a result of the ethnic politics have been profoundly affecting the church from different dimensions. These hatred views are threatening the church's survival and security of its members particularly who lives in Oromia, Beni Shangul Gumuz, Somali, Sidama and Gedeo. Until this day, massacre, displacement and oppression of Christians, burning of churches and prohibition of public Christian ceremonies are common features of Christians in the aforementioned areas.

Anti-Orthodox Christian views are emerged mainly due to lack of understanding on or deliberate ignorance and prejudice of the history and mission of the church. Everything which is associated with the ruling families in the past is employed to accuse and disregard the church. The alleged prejudice of ethno-nationalist upon the EOC associated with the relationship it has with state is groundless. Of course, church and state relationship in the past was very common historical phenomena across the world.

This paper tries to forward some points to be taken into consideration in order to secure the life of Orthodox Christians and others who are vulnerable for different problems as a result of this challenge. The first thing is that contemporary perspective towards the past should be considered in the context of the nature of history particularly time and spatial contexts. It is agreeable that what seemed just in the past may not similarly appear in our time. One's judgment of past event should be managed in the context of the past unless it has relevance to our presence. It must not but employed to earn political profit on the burden of the generations of now and tomorrow. In this regard, ethno-nationalist writers have to think for the solidarity of all Ethiopians. If one obliged to benefit from past mistakes, it is necessary to take understanding that there is no pure and egalitarian history and culture that did not affect others economically, culturally and socially. Categorization of peoples as "native" and "migrant" has to be corrected because persecutions have been made considering one native and others as new arrivals constructed for the purpose of ethnicization. This categorization has been managed against the Amharas and others who are associated with the Orthodox Christianity. The frequent problems of the church are now mainly occurred as a result of such misinterpretations.

Secondly, the government structures particularly the security forces have responsibility to keep the security of the church and other religious institutions from ethnic and religious based attacks. The best way for this is that the prevailing of rule of law that potentially safeguards the security of Orthodox minorities and others who have diverse religious backgrounds.

Thirdly, the church has to enhance its administrative structure that can formally cope up with contemporary political, economic and social scenarios emerged at national or global levels. The administrative structure should be functional for that to outshine the church at influential status at national and international levels either in its religious mission and creating peaceful environment for all human kinds. In relation to this, the administrative structure has to work seriously in solving internal problems related with corruption, segregation and greedy those are exercising within it. It also has to open its structure for change that can be made as a result of the change of context of the world technologically, economically and politically.

Fourthly, empowering Orthodox Christian youth associations is relevant to create well informed and spiritually committed Orthodox Christians who have togetherness and courage to defend and serve their church in different fields. In this regard, Sunday schools, Orthodox Christian youth associations like Mahbere Kidusan, and other local youth associations such as local youth groups who facilitate holyday celebrations like Timket (Epiphany) and Meskel (the Finding of the True Cross).

Fifthly, all Orthodox Christians have responsibility and right of engagement in all affairs of the church in one or another way. Therefore, the engagements made and the responsibilities given have to be made with a well-informed base of Orthodox Christian teachings. This has to be understood in the way that the Church has to establish and strength platforms to get intact their member properly. Christians also have to do their best to

know more about their church including its history and religious values and thoughts.

Finally, Orthodox Christians have to think out of the net of ethnicity that currently strain the coexistence of Ethiopians and threaten the unity of the church. Understanding has to be made that Christianity is given to all races of human kind. Despite of the diverse background Christians have now, it is just that all of them are one in Christ.