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DRINKING, RUMOUR, AND ETHNICITY IN JIMMA, ETHIOPIA

Daniel Mains

As historians and anthropologists have shown (Abbink 1999; Bryceson 2002; van Onselen 1982; Willis 2002), the study of alcohol often creates a useful opening for understanding wider economic and political processes. In 2002 I went to Jimma, roughly 250 km south-west of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with the intent to investigate local forms of 'cosmopolitanism' related to the consumption of modern bottled beer as opposed to locally produced forms of alcohol. However, as I began my research I was repeatedly told that there had been a great decline in the number of modern drinking establishments in Jimma. Long-time residents pointed out particular streets that had been lined with bars and claimed that bar hopping had been a favourite pastime among professional young men, but this had all changed in the last ten years.

I was surprised to find that informants' explanations for this supposed decline had little to do with economics or even 'modernity'. Rather, many of their narratives centred on the introduction of ethnic federalism that occurred after 1991 and the increased salience of ethnicity that it has encouraged. Within these narratives, the disappearance of bars was due to the relationship between ethnic federalism and the drinking habits of Oromo Muslims. This explanation for the decline of modern bars had an interesting fit with other rumours I encountered through my research. The rumours wove together themes of religion, ethnicity, and nationalism in a way that encourages a rethinking of Ethiopia's recent introduction of a policy of ethnic federalism. An analysis of these rumours provides three primary insights. First, it clarifies the complex manner in which ethnicity, religion, and nationalism are intertwined in Ethiopia and reveals the indirect manner in which this relationship is constructed on a day-to-day basis. Second, it demonstrates how a particularly Ethiopian form of discourse functions as both a means of resisting and coping with loss of political power and economic decline. Finally, it reveals how international news media and anxieties about globalisation are interrelated with local power struggles.

I will begin by discussing the roots of ethnic federalism in relation to Ethiopia's history, and describing the academic and political discourse surrounding the issue. Post-1991 Ethiopian politics has been conceptualised by academics almost entirely in terms of ethnicity, and attention to everyday discourse makes it possible to expand on this perspective. The rumours that emerged during my research come from a predominantly Amhara Ethiopian Orthodox Christian viewpoint

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and deal with the behaviour of Oromo Muslims and Protestants (in Jimma Protestants are not associated with a particular ethnicity).[1] My analysis will treat rumour as a means of understanding actual changes in behaviour that have occurred after the introduction of ethnic federalism, as well as a discourse that reveals the speaker's perspective on issues of ethnicity, religion, and nation.

ETHIOPIAN HISTORY AND ETHNIC FEDERALISM

Ethiopia's introduction of a federalist system of government must be understood in relation to the country's political history. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the core areas of the old Orthodox Christian Abyssinian empire were unified, and new territories in the south were conquered in order to form the modern Ethiopian state. Especially in what is now southern and western Ethiopia the local populations lost large amounts of their land and were subjected to the sometimes harsh rule of northerners (Bahru Zewde 1991; Donham 1986). The northerners who participated in the southern expansion were predominantly ethnically Amhara but also included significant numbers of Tigreans, Oromo Christians, and Gurage.[2] The fact that the formation of Ethiopia as a nation state coincided with the Amhara expansion into southern and western Ethiopia has meant that being Ethiopian has often been synonymous with being Amhara.

The relationship with northern Ethiopia was slightly different in Jimma. In the 1830s a powerful monarchy developed in the Jimma region and replaced *gada*, an age grade system used for governance since the coming of the Oromo in the early 1700s (for a detailed analysis of *gada*, see Asmarom Legesse 1973, 2000). The introduction of Islam roughly coincided with the development of the monarchy, and throughout the nineteenth century Islam was spread in the Jimma region (Lewis 1965; Mohammed Hassen 1990). In 1878 Abba Jifar II, the best known of Jimma's kings, came to power. Abba Jifar did much to increase trade in what was already a prosperous kingdom. He was also known to be an especially devout Muslim and encouraged the construction of numerous mosques. At the end of the nineteenth century when Menelik II led the Abyssinian expansion into what is now

[1] Throughout this paper I refer to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as Orthodox and all forms of Protestantism as Protestant. While Orthodox Christians generally refer to themselves simply as Christian, the term 'Orthodox' is preferable in order to avoid implying that Protestants are not also Christians. I have grouped all Protestants together because this is how they are conceived of within the primarily Orthodox discourses on which my analysis will be based.

[2] As is the case with much of Ethiopia's history, ethnic boundaries are blurry here. Amhara ethnicity seems to have been particularly flexible and local populations were able to 'become' Amhara through assimilation: learning Amharic, converting to Orthodox Christianity, and intermarriage (Donham 1986). In terms of the popular memory, this expansion is generally conceived of in terms of the Amhara moving south and dominating (or 'civilising', depending on one's perspective) local ethnic groups.

southern Ethiopia, Abba Jifar reached an agreement with Menelik that allowed him to retain power and prevented the construction of Orthodox Christian churches in Jimma, in return for paying a yearly tribute. This relationship was maintained up until Abba Jifar's death, and the heavy taxation and loss of land experienced in the rest of southern Ethiopia did not occur in Jimma until after the Italian occupation ended in 1941.

In 1974 Haile Sellassie was overthrown and the Marxist military regime known as the 'Derg', came to power. Despite the land reform that occurred under the Derg, Amhara cultural and political dominance was left basically unchanged (Clapham 2002). Amharic was still the language of governance throughout the country and even at the local level political power was largely in the hands of the Amhara.

In 1991 the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) drove the Marxist military regime from power, and implemented a system of ethnic federalism. The EPRDF is strongly associated with the Tigray region. Tigray is located along Ethiopia's northern border with Eritrea and was involved in a long civil war with the central government during the Derg regime. As the civil war progressed and the suffering of Tigrean people increased, the conflict began to take on ethnic dimensions. The ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of the Tigray region caused the conflict to be viewed not simply in political terms but as a case of ethnic oppression. The EPRDF's decision to implement ethnic federalism was partially a result of this civil war and partially in recognition of the diverse needs of Ethiopia's over seventy ethnic groups. Under ethnic federalism, Ethiopia is divided into eleven states (two cities and nine regions) based primarily on historic ethnic boundaries.[3] States have a broad range of power covering education, economic development, health, police forces, and legal courts. Regions may conduct government business and education in the language of their choice, and in theory they have the right to secede and form their own nation, although it seems unlikely that this would actually occur peacefully.

The government rhetoric is that ethnic federalism unites a diverse nation by giving rights to regions and ethnic groups. Ideally, through decentralisation local power should be in the hands of individuals who are responsible to the needs of the immediate community. Two primary critiques of the EPRDF and ethnic federalism have emerged, especially among Ethiopian intellectuals. The first is associated with an ethnic regionalist perspective and argues that regional leaders are appointed by the ruling party and do not represent the needs and desires of local people, regardless of their ethnicity. This perspective encourages the formation of stronger regional parties that will promote ethnic interests without influence from the central government. The

[3] It is likely that ethnic federalism has solidified what were previously loose and flexible boundaries. Particularly in the case of smaller ethnic groups, the historic reality of these boundaries has been highly disputed. See Markakis (1998) for an excellent description of disputes over ethnic identity and regional boundaries that have developed as a result of ethnic federalism.

alternative nationalist perspective promotes the notion of Ethiopia as a country with a single national identity. Ethnic federalism is seen as divisive and destructive to the needs of the country as a whole. This perspective is usually associated with the Amhara who tend to self-identify as 'Ethiopian' to a greater degree than other ethnic groups.

These perspectives are voiced primarily by intellectuals and elites—usually well-educated individuals living in Addis Ababa, or in some cases outside of Ethiopia—and they have been described in other work on Ethiopian politics.[4] The positions are frequently expressed through opinion pieces in private newspapers. In general, academic discussions of ethnic federalism have described these competing positions but they have not given attention to the experience of political change at the quotidian level (Abebe Zegeye and Pausewang 1994; Asafa Jalata 1993; Mohamed Salih and Markakis 1998; Kidane Mengisteab 2001). There is a significant gap between the world view of the intellectual elite who promote the perspectives described above and the general Ethiopian population (Lewis 1996: 45). The lack of attention to discussions among the non-elite has meant that political conflict has been viewed primarily in terms of ethnicity, and other more subtle factors have been overlooked.

Especially in the present context of extremely high unemployment, urban Ethiopians pass their ample spare time with constant conversation. At the everyday level, individuals have responded to ethnic federalism with layers and layers of talk, and much of this talk has been in the form of rumour. Rumours are particularly valuable for analysis because they provide insights into the perspective of the speaker as well as the object of discussion. In contrast to the elite perspectives that are often published in private newspaper editorials, rumours are passed orally from person to person. Instead of taking a more abstract or analytical perspective on politics, rumours describe the particular actions of groups and individuals. In addition to being interesting in themselves, the rumours that have been generated in response to post-1991 political changes complicate the elite discourse described above by drawing attention to the importance of religion and nationalism, as well as global flows of economy and culture.

RUMOUR AND THE EXPERIENCE OF POLITICAL CHANGE

Today the city of Jimma (which must be distinguished from Jimma zone) has a population of about 100,000 and is located in a very fertile area that produces large quantities of coffee and khat, Ethiopia's two major cash crops. Based on the 1984 national census, approximately 25 per cent of the population of Jimma city was Amhara, 40 per cent was Oromo, and the other 35 per cent was predominantly made up of

[4] Of particular use for me have been James *et al.* (2002), Kidane Mengisteab (2001), Loukeris (2001), and Tegegne Teka (1998).

Gurage, Kulo, and Kaffa people. It is likely that the Oromo population has increased in the twenty years since this census due to individuals migrating from other regions in search of government employment. In terms of religion, about 60 per cent of the population was Orthodox Christian, 30 per cent was Muslim, and 7 per cent was Protestant. Almost all Jimma Oromos are Muslim, and the presence of Orthodox Christian Oromos who have migrated from other regions accounts for the population differences between Oromos and Muslims. The easing of restrictions on foreign missionaries means that the Protestant population in Jimma probably increased significantly after the fall of the Derg in 1991.

As I noted above, rumours concerning the decline of drinking at modern bars initiated my investigation into the relationship between popular discourse and ethnic federalism. Some informants explained the disappearance of bars in terms of changes in the drinking habits of Oromo Muslims. It is only since 1991 that local political power has been returned to the hands of the local people. Today Oromos, many of them Muslim, occupy most if not all local governmental positions. Ethnic federalism coincided with another important change. The removal of the Marxist military regime has allowed increasing flows of international money to enter Ethiopia. Orthodox Christian informants pointed to the high number of new mosques under construction in Jimma as evidence that local Muslims receive financial support from Islamic organisations outside of Ethiopia. This money is used for religious community projects and is helpful in obtaining political power. In a context where Oromos have access to political power and financial support is associated with Islam, the public performance of one's religious piety provides tangible material benefits. Even for those who do not seek political office, avoiding drinking and other forbidden activities enables the maintenance of valuable social networks.

In this context, the social meaning of passing time at a bar has changed. Previously it was a respectable way of spending time, especially in contrast to the heavier drinking that takes place at houses serving locally brewed drinks. When the political elite avoids bars in order to maintain a respectable image, drinking begins to lose its prestige, even for non-Muslims. Bar hopping is no longer a lifestyle associated with power. Consequently, for the upper class who can afford to drink at a bar, this type of consumption is no longer a marker of status.

The notion that ethnic politics has caused Oromo Muslims to stop drinking at bars involves a relatively complex argument that purports to establish a link between political change and the everyday activity of drinking. While I do think this narrative provides an important insight into a shift in how men in Jimma use their leisure time, the evidence for this argument should be viewed critically. The informants who espoused this view were Amhara Orthodox Christians. In this sense, rumours about influxes of international money and the drinking habits of Oromo Muslims might be more useful as a means for better understanding the Orthodox Christian perspective on political and economic change.

This explanation regarding the drinking habits of Oromos was confined to a few politically insightful individuals, but it has an interesting relationship with rumours that I heard concerning the behaviour of Muslims in the Jimma area. I was told that many Muslims in rural areas had begun to refuse to eat any meat for fear that someone who was 'impure' had raised the animal. There were also reports of women in rural areas having their breasts chopped off for breastfeeding in public. Both of these rumours are more extreme variations of discussions that I continually encountered surrounding issues of gender, clothing and eating practices among Muslims. Informants described a significant increase in the number of women choosing to veil their faces in public and the number of men growing long beards. In regard to food, historically Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia have not eaten meat that is not properly blessed, and therefore Orthodox Christians will not eat meat slaughtered by a Muslim and vice versa. Orthodox Christians in Jimma claimed that it is common knowledge that Muslim cooking is inferior to that of Christians. It was argued that Muslims took less care in the preparation of their food and that more educated cosmopolitan Muslims who appreciate good food frequently eat at Orthodox Christian restaurants (while the signs for Muslim restaurants are clearly marked by a crescent moon, Orthodox Christian restaurants are unmarked and are simply 'restaurants'). In this discourse, behaviour that was seen as marking religious difference was portrayed in an especially negative way.

Two primary themes run through these stories. One is the flexibility of religious and ethnic identity. The explanation for the decline of bars assumes that Muslims used to drink in public prior to the recent political changes. In other words, religion and ethnicity are only assumed to be motivating forces when the incentives of political power and financial support are present. Orthodox Christian informants emphasised that Muslims are in fact very heavy drinkers but now they just consume alcohol at home. From this perspective, religion—or at least the religion of others—is very casual and may be adopted or discarded easily depending on the benefits that it brings. The speaker is constant or invulnerable to the impacts of political change, while the object of the discourse is shifting and continually molded by a new environment.

The second theme involves describing change by contrasting a peaceful past with a turbulent present. Orthodox Christians claimed that Muslims and Christians had always got along very well, living together and engaging in many of the same social activities, but this had all changed in the past ten years. While the explanation behind the disappearance of modern bars does not necessarily depict Muslim behaviour negatively, like the other more extreme rumours it is a way of expressing change. These rumours voice disapproval with the creation of difference and produce memories of a previous time when these differences were not so important. The flexibility of identity is highlighted but flexibility itself is not portrayed negatively. In the case of the rumours surrounding Muslim eating practices, it was clear that the rural Muslims who adopted extremely rigid restrictions on

eating meat were behaving strangely and increasing social tensions. The cosmopolitan Muslims who ate at Orthodox Christian restaurants were behaving rationally and simply choosing to eat the better prepared food. Orthodox Christians who did not eat at Muslim restaurants could justify their choice on the basis of both religion and taste. In this sense, Orthodox Christians were motivated not just by religion but by a seemingly more rational sense of appropriate behaviour. The behaviour of Oromo Muslims was not problematic because of its inconsistencies but because it deviated from the Amhara Christian norm and drew attention to religious and ethnic differences.

These rumours may be interpreted as a strategy for de-naturalising the identity of others. To claim that Muslims avoid bars in order to obtain power is to question the existence of a fundamental or essential identity. An attack on the legitimacy of ethnic identity is an implicit critique of the new Ethiopian political system and fits well with the nationalist perspective that ethnic politics is divisive and produces conflict. The stories and rumours surrounding the behaviour of Oromo Muslims are used to provide evidence that ethnic federalism has produced conflict where there was previously peace. Stories that illustrate the fluidity of Muslim Oromo identity imply that (1) dividing power along lines of ethnicity is nonsensical because the behaviour of ethnic groups changes with time, and (2) ethnic federalism produces conflict by giving ethnic groups material incentives to perform their differences. These stories represent an argument for a return to an imagined past when everyone was simply Ethiopian and supposedly unmarked by ethnic difference.

The rumours I have described come primarily from conversations and informal discussions. Typically I would initiate a conversation by asking about the drinking habits of others and within the course of the conversation individuals would pass on various rumours. Rumour has an interesting relationship with Amhara communicative practices as they are described in early ethnographies. Levine (1965: 248) discusses the importance of the insult as an aspect of Amhara communication. While the ability to insult others was a respected skill that could be used for increasing ones social status, delivering an insult was also a punishable offence and cause for legal action. Consequently, it was very important to give an insult without the recipient being able to prove that he had been insulted. Levine (*op. cit.*: 251) claims that 'one might render the basic principle that informs communication among the Amhara as: avoid binding commitments; maximise the degrees of freedom left after any utterance'. It would seem that rumour is an ideal means for advancing an idea without taking responsibility for it. No one claimed to have actually observed the behaviour of rural Muslims. Individuals were simply repeating reports that they had heard from others. With regard to claims about economic support from international Islamic organisations, I frequently asked my Orthodox informants how they could have financial information about the construction of mosques. The common response was first to chuckle in a manner that implied that I had asked a foolish question, and then explain that in Ethiopia oral communication is an extremely powerful force that prevents anything

from remaining secret. The effect was to deny direct responsibility for the potentially damaging information, without bringing the validity of the information into question. The spreader of rumour is able to make a clear argument while avoiding committing himself to a position.

Formal interviews that I conducted with Muslim elders in the Jimma area provide a very different perspective on ethnicity and politics in Ethiopia. In particular, they provide a counter-discourse to the rumours voiced by Amhara Christians and highlight the importance of time in discussions of ethnicity. In exploring the history of Jimma city, I interviewed two Oromo Muslims who had lived in the area since the early twentieth century.[5] In describing Jimma's recent history both men spent considerable time discussing the brief reign of Abba Jobir during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936–41). Abba Jobir was the grandson of Abba Jifar II. After Abba Jifar II's death in 1932 and Haile Sellassie's rise to power, Abba Jobir was imprisoned for exchanging letters with the Italians. Following the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936, Abba Jobir was released from prison and made 'sultan' of the 'Sidamo/Galla' region. Both elders characterised Abba Jobir as aggressive and headstrong, and having a strong dislike for Haile Sellassie and Amhara people in general. While Abba Jobir's collaboration with the Italians would seem to make him a traitor, this was not the way he was described by the Oromo elders that I spoke with. The older of the two claimed that Jobir was a hero, especially for his courage in leading attacks against local *shifta* ('bandits'). The other elder acknowledged Aba Jobir's strong will but questioned his intelligence and competence as a leader. Neither elder criticised Abba Jobir's collaboration with the Italians and both described the five-year occupation as a relatively positive era in Jimma's history. The praise for the Italians seemed to be not so much an approval of colonialism as a critique of Amhara domination. Both elders proudly claimed that Abba Jobir put a price on the head of Amhara Christians. Although he was said to have paid thirty Ethiopian birr for the head of any Amhara, neither elder could remember a specific instance of Amhara people being killed for a reward. Abba Jobir was also said to have led random attacks on Amhara towns during his reign, but again this could not be confirmed with details about attacks on specific towns.

Rumours passed on through casual conversation are clearly a significantly different form of discourse than accounts of history obtained through formal interviews. Unlike a rumour where the original source of information is never encountered, in a formal interview the informant actually takes responsibility for the validity of the information being passed on. That said, the elders' narratives are similar to rumour in the sense that they do not claim to have experienced the events they are describing first-hand. Abba Jobir's attacks on the Amhara are based on oral accounts passed from person to person. In this sense,

[5] These interviews would not have been possible without the assistance of Ketabo Abdiyo from Jimma University's Department of History.

these narratives may be analysed as contemporary constructions of ethnicity. Both elders took pleasure in telling about the bounty placed on Amhara lives and were not at all bothered that no one seemed to have actually sought out this reward. For the elders the importance of the story was that Abba Jobir had struck back against Amhara rule. Like the rumours described above, in these stories ethnicity is political but conflict and difference have a history that begins well before the introduction of ethnic federalism in 1991. If the rumours that are shared among Amhara Christians highlight the flexibility of ethnicity and the recent development of ethnic difference, the histories gathered from Oromo elders assert the deep roots of conflict in Ethiopia. By asserting that ethnic difference is a historic rather than recent phenomenon these narratives support the ethnic regionalist perspective that regional political and cultural autonomy is necessary and desirable.

Herbert Lewis' discussion (1996) of political consciousness among the Oromo is useful in contextualising recently gathered historical narratives. Lewis notes that while conducting research in Jimma in 1959 Oromo were certainly aware of their ethnic identity but were not actively expressing opposition towards local Amhara. He did not observe high levels of ethnic nationalism until he returned to Ethiopia in the 1990s. It would seem that in focusing on ethnic conflict, the historical narratives that I gathered are at least partially a product of the current context of ethnic federalism.

The fact that rumours and historical accounts contain themes similar to those found in the discourses of nationalists and ethnic regionalists indicates that to some extent these discourses accurately describe the everyday experience of political change. By spreading rumours about changes in the behaviour of Oromo Muslims, Amhara Christians are participating in a political discourse that critiques ethnic federalism on the basis that it is divisive and produces conflict where none existed before. By representing history as being marked by ethnic conflict, the stories of Oromo Muslims fit with a discourse that supports ethnic federalism (although not in its current form) on the basis of a need for self-determination among politically and culturally distinct ethnic groups. While there is no doubt that ethnic conflict is an important aspect of the experience of federalism, a closer look at other sets of rumours as well as the global context in which they are occurring provides insights into the complexities of political change in Ethiopia.

RELIGION, ETHNIC FEDERALISM, AND GLOBAL POLITICS

The rumours I have discussed indicate that, at least in areas like Jimma where ethnicity maps onto religion, ethnic politics is highly influenced by religious difference. While these rumours may be interpreted in terms of ethnic political discourse they are certainly concerned with religion as well. The behaviours that mark difference in terms of dress, eating, and drinking are all motivated by religion. The importance of religion has been largely ignored in previous discussions of Ethiopian

ethnic federalism. It is not just ethnic identity that is heightened by ethnic federalism but religious identity as well.

The relationship between Christianity, Islam, and politics is nothing new in Ethiopia. Ahmed Grahn's invasion of Ethiopia during the first half of the sixteenth century nearly destroyed the Christian empire. Religiously oriented rumours have been used as a political tool in the past as well. Lij Iyyasu's reign of power in Ethiopia quickly came to an end when he was accused of converting to Islam. Among other rumours used to undermine his support, it was said that he ate meat slaughtered by Muslims (Bahru Zewde 1991).

Instead of acknowledging the somewhat tense historic relationship between Christianity and Islam, many Orthodox Christians explicitly deny the presence of any religious conflict in the past. For example, in casual discussions of history, informants have stated that Ahmed Grahn's invasion was motivated by a desire for land, and religion was not an important factor. Similar to ethnic difference, among Orthodox Christians religious difference is portrayed as being new and generated by forces outside of Ethiopia. The rumours I have described above were frequently mentioned in conjunction with contemporary events that have been widely covered in international news media. Informants referenced September 11th, Al-Qa'ida, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Israel–Palestine conflict. For example, I was told that many local Muslims had only begun to grow out their beards after the attacks of September 11th and that they claim to be associated with Al-Qa'ida. My own impression is that the presence of any sort of foreign-funded Islamic terrorist organisation in Jimma is extremely unlikely. However, Ethiopia receives much of the same media as the United States and there is no doubt that Christian–Muslim tensions have a prominent place in the popular consciousness. An interesting example is a T-shirt I have seen worn by young men on a couple of different occasions. The T-shirt is emblazoned with a huge picture of Osama bin Laden's face and name (written in English). Similar shirts featuring international soccer players or American celebrities are quite common. While I have not discussed the shirt with the wearers, in other conversations with young Ethiopians Osama bin Laden has been mentioned as a sort of hero. Individuals did not appear to be aware of his specific political or religious philosophy and he was often grouped together with Saddam Hussein. Both were valorised for providing a general resistance to the United States. My sense is that in Ethiopia 'Osama bin Laden' and 'Al-Qa'ida' are signs that do not refer directly to the specific actions of international Islamic organisations or the particular policies of the United States. When these terms and images are invoked, they reference a more general sense of international Islam, anti-Americanism, and respect for celebrity. It seems that in wearing an Osama bin Laden shirt youth are making no more or less of a political statement than someone wearing a shirt featuring the British football player David Beckham or the American rap musician 50 Cent.

The same analysis could be applied to Orthodox Christian reactions to the war in Iraq. For example, Orthodox Christians were generally

very happy about the capture of Saddam Hussein. The importance of his capture was explained not so much in terms of its effect on the situation in Iraq as its impact on a more generalised conflict between Muslims and Christians that was seen as extending into Ethiopia. Informants argued that Saddam Hussein's capture would reduce the morale of Ethiopian Muslims and prevent the rumoured behaviours described above. In these discussions the relationship between Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and the US was similar to the manner in which people support an athletic team. US victories and defeats do not appear to have a direct material or political impact on life in Ethiopia but Orthodox Christians still identified themselves with American interests and took great pleasure in watching the news coverage of Saddam Hussein's capture on CNN.

In Ethiopia the experience of ethnic federalism appears to have a reciprocal relationship with international politics, particularly as it is perceived through popular news media. On the one hand, spreading rumours about the behaviour of rural Muslims can be interpreted partially as a means of taking a position in an international Christianity–Islam conflict. Creating stories that link together the construction of foreign-funded mosques, 'strange' behaviour, and ethnic tension is an implicit critique of international Islamic organisations. Like the critique of ethnic federalism, it is a statement that religious intervention has created conflict and social divisions within a peaceful community. In telling these stories, Amhara Christians seem to be both making a general statement that Islam is a potentially dangerous religion, and constructing themselves as allies of the United States and a broadly defined notion of Western Christianity.

At the same time, the construction of these rumours is conditioned by exposure to news media. Narratives that link rumoured behaviour with international Islam are only meaningful within a context of international conflict. Amhara Christians are able to produce these rumours because they have been exposed to media depictions of Christian–Muslim conflict. Everyday discourse surrounding ethnic federalism is not constructed only in relation to local politics. These rumours are both responses to, and attempts at, influencing international narratives of political conflict.

RUMOUR, RELIGION, AND NATION

While there is a significant relationship between the rumours I have described and international Muslim–Christian tensions, Orthodox Christian discussions of Protestants reveal that nationalism may be just as important as any sort of divide between Christianity and Islam. Particularly after September 11th it is very easy to fall into the trap of analysing religious conflict in terms of Christian vs. Muslim and, while this is an important factor, the situation in Ethiopia is much more complex than this. Amhara Christian discourse is interrelated with anxieties concerning the ability to dictate what it means to be Ethiopian

in a context of increased international flows of finance and culture, and declining political and economic power. Rumours are a means of both resisting and coping with these changes.

Most Ethiopian Protestants are evangelical and abstain from drinking, dancing, or non-religious singing. They are associated with foreign missionaries and form a small minority of the population in Jimma. Persecution of Protestants is well documented historically (Donham 1999) and religious prejudices continue to be openly expressed. The word *pente* (from 'Pentecostal') is used as a pejorative term for all Protestants regardless of their particular religious affiliation. Where a similar ethnically based insult is almost never heard outside of homogenous private conversation it is not uncommon for '*pente*' to be thrown around in public settings or in casual discussions among religiously mixed groups. Ethiopian Protestants claim that they are unable to live in certain regions of the country because of the day-to-day discrimination that they face.

Like much of Africa, funerals in urban areas like Jimma play an extremely important role in creating the social networks that enable economic subsistence. Individuals spend large portions of their time at funerals and the periodic gatherings that follow a death. Some informants reported that, while Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Jimma generally attend the funerals of their neighbours regardless of religious differences, there is no social obligation to attend a Protestant funeral.[6] Protestants also frequently do not participate in the same community credit organisations (*ikub*) as Muslims and Orthodox Christians. These credit organisations are essential for starting small businesses or dealing with an unexpected crisis like a death or illness. In both social and economic terms, Protestants stand outside the popular majority formed by Orthodox Christians and Muslims.

Unlike Muslims and Orthodox Christians, Protestants in Jimma are not associated with a particular ethnicity and do not threaten established political hierarchies. However, this has not prevented the spread of politically oriented rumours. It was a common belief that Protestant missionaries are backed by the United States CIA. The behaviour of Protestants during Ethiopia's recent war with Eritrea was used to provide evidence for this claim. At the time of the war, Ethiopian nationalism ran extremely high. The ethnic tensions that seemed to have been growing were temporarily forgotten and large numbers of young men, including Oromos, volunteered to join the army and defend Ethiopia's borders. Informants explained that Protestants were unique in showing little interest in the war effort. Protestants claimed that their allegiance was to God not Ethiopia and attempted to avoid serving as

[6] There was some difference of opinion among informants about the role of religion in organising burial associations. In theory Ethiopian *idder*s ('burial associations') are organised by neighbourhood and include all willing participants regardless of religion, ethnicity, or class, but it is not clear exactly how this translates into practice. While some informants describe *idder*s as inclusive, heterogeneous organisations, others have specifically stated that their choice to attend funerals is determined in part by religion.

soldiers. The link between the CIA and Protestant pacifism was made because the United States tried to discourage the Ethiopia–Eritrea war by cutting off a large amount of aid to both countries. It was argued that Protestants share a common goal with the US government of preventing Ethiopia from defending its borders. The fact that Protestant activity in Ethiopia is almost entirely supported by American and European missionaries was given as further evidence that religion is a thin veil for the advancement of American political interests. From this perspective, Protestantism is a tool for undermining Ethiopian nationalism at the grass-roots level and there are some who argued that it is a means of destroying the nation.

While rumours surrounding Muslims may be interrelated with local power struggles, the new policy of ethnic federalism, religious conflict, and international news media, this does not seem to be the case in discussions of Protestants. Here the rumours express a more general fear of outside influence and its impact on Ethiopian identity. From the Orthodox Christian perspective, Protestantism denationalises Ethiopians. This occurs at both a cultural and a political level. The refusal of Protestants to consume alcohol or take part in non-religious singing and dancing means that they cannot participate in traditional Orthodox Christian cultural activities. This combined with the lack of Protestant participation in Orthodox Christian or Muslim funerals and community credit organisations enables Orthodox Christians to construct Protestants as intrinsically different. Protestants do not participate in the everyday rituals and interactions that make a person Ethiopian. At the political level, the refusal of Protestants to support a war that involved preserving national borders is taken as further evidence that they are somehow not 'Ethiopian'.

The same interpretation could be applied to rumours regarding Muslims. International money is perceived as transforming the day-to-day behaviour of Muslims to the degree that they may no longer fit into Amhara Christian conceptions of what it means to be Ethiopian. Recent changes in patterns of eating, drinking, dress, and socialising all mark Muslims as different from the Ethiopian norm and, by drawing attention to this behaviour, Amhara Christians are claiming that Muslims may also be losing their 'Ethiopianness'. The rumours surrounding Protestants and Muslims indicate the multiple levels on which national identity may be defined. On the one hand, identity appears to be performed through the everyday rituals that are considered to be part of 'national culture' (i.e. sharing alcoholic beverages with friends, attending a neighbour's funeral). On the other hand, national identity is marked by activities that explicitly support the nation (i.e. fighting in a war, flying the flag). It is when national identity is denied at both the cultural and the political level that difference is especially obvious and may become a source of tension.

It is significant that in both the rumours about Muslims and those about Protestants, the forces undermining Ethiopian nationalism were perceived as originating outside of Ethiopia. Spatially positioning the source of change outside of Ethiopia's political boundaries serves to

further characterise the cultural and political behaviour of Muslims and Protestants as non-Ethiopian. Within this discourse, rumoured behaviours did not emerge out of the cultural heterogeneity of Ethiopia but were a result of the manipulations of foreign powers. Amhara Christian discourse around nationalism is related to fears about the integrity of an Ethiopian identity in a context of globalisation. Foreign missionaries and international Islamic organisations were the sources of cultural change, and ethnic federalism provided the environment in which the impact of these forces could be especially potent. In this discourse, local politics was thoroughly intertwined with international affairs. In this sense the rumours express both an awareness of the relationship between the global and the local, and a fear that global flows of culture and money may be destroying important values surrounding national identity.

Associating the rumoured behaviour with foreign forces serves to further dehistoricise ethnic and religious tension in Ethiopia. Similar to critiques of ethnic federalism, difference or conflict among Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and Protestants is depicted as something that would not exist in Ethiopia without the interference of foreign money. Historical factors that may be at the root of this conflict are ignored in favour of spatial explanations.

The relationship between religion and nation in Ethiopia is not new and this is not the first time that the promotion of religions by foreign forces has been viewed as an attack on the state. Up until 1974 all Ethiopian emperors claimed a divine right to power on the basis of their ability to trace their descent back to Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Political power, Orthodox Christianity, and being Ethiopian were so intertwined that it was almost unthinkable for one to exist without the other. The case of Lij Iyassu that was mentioned earlier is a good example of what could happen if a leader's religious loyalty was brought into question. Despite a formal separation between church and state after the fall of Haile Sellassie, an important symbolic relationship between the Christian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian government was maintained even through the Marxist Derg regime (Donham 1999). Under the current government the ideological separation is still not complete. For example, Ethiopian flags are proudly displayed at Orthodox Christian churches. It would be very surprising to see similar national symbols at a mosque or Protestant church.

Donham (1999: 145) describes the persecution of Protestants that occurred under the Derg regime after it became clear that many Protestants were not fully committed to the process of nation building through Marxism. In that case, Protestants were also subjected to discrimination because of their uninterest in national projects and association with Western forces. The key difference from past instances of conflict with regard to religion and nation is that in the present case the concept of an Ethiopian identity is being questioned at the state level, and the cultural symbols that cemented the relationship between being Orthodox, Amhara, and Ethiopian are beginning to lose their force. In this context, rumour may serve as a means for Amhara

Christians to cope with the loss of political power and control over cultural symbols.

Under the Derg, the national slogan was 'Ethiopia First'. Attempts at modernisation were linked to the concept of Ethiopia as a nation with a single identity. While the Derg explicitly acknowledged ethnic diversity, and therefore heightened its importance as a topic of national discourse (Clapham 2002; Donham 1999), prior to 1991 questions regarding Ethiopia's national identity were never formally raised. Under ethnic federalism a single national identity has come into question. Each ethnic group is assumed to have distinct desires, and the nation's identity is formed from some combination of these needs. For the first time the link between being Amhara, Orthodox Christian, and Ethiopian is being pulled apart at the state level, and what it means to be an Ethiopian is an open question. Ethiopia as a political entity still exists, but under ethnic federalism a new national identity that incorporates ethnic diversity has yet to emerge.[7] For the most part, ethnic regionalists define identity on the basis of ethnicity and are therefore not interested in asserting a national identity. Under ethnic federalism, the point of contention is not so much over competing nationalisms as over the existence of a national identity at all.

A key aspect of this process is the gradual change in the meaning of symbols that have been associated with being Ethiopian. Benedict Anderson's discussion (1991) of the museum is useful for understanding this shift. In northern Ethiopia, historic sites like Axum, Lallibella, or Fasil's Castle have been preserved for visits from tourists or religious pilgrims.[8] While most Ethiopians are not financially capable of making these trips, young people often envision touring 'historical places' as an important part of their future life. The images of the structures have been iconicised into easily recognisable silhouettes that are printed on numerous popular cultural items (wall hangings are especially common). Although the stelae of Axum pre-date Christianity in Ethiopia, they are still associated with the historic state project that has emerged out of the northern Ethiopian highlands. Each of these cultural sites contributed to the creation of national identity in the manner described by Anderson (1991: 178–184). However, under ethnic federalism these symbols have become increasingly associated with a particular ethnicity, religion, and historical period instead of a national identity. An Oromo intellectual friend of mine compared the presence of wall hangings featuring images of Lallibella in an Addis Ababa bar to a 'western' or 'cowboy' bar in the United States. Both

[7] Various ethnically based political movements have developed and promoted regional secession (for example, the Oromo Liberation Front), but these groups have been suppressed by the federal government and have yet to mount any serious threat to the integrity of the Ethiopian state.

[8] Today Axum consists of stelae up to 33 m in height that were constructed during the Axumite civilisation (first to sixth centuries AD). Lallibela is a complex of rock-hewn churches carved into the ground during the twelfth century. Fasil's Castle was constructed during the seventeenth century in the former capital of the Ethiopian empire, Gondar.

the cowboy and Lallibella are symbols that played an ideological role in national expansion and the oppression of local peoples. In terms of representing national identity, an ancient Orthodox Christian church is no more universal in Ethiopia than a cowboy on a horse is in the United States. While it is unlikely that most individuals would articulate this idea in these terms, there is a growing sentiment that an 'Ethiopian' identity as it has been constructed historically should be rejected.

It is tempting to interpret the changing meaning of national symbols as indicative of a general disintegration of nationalism in Ethiopia but this would be too simple. At the time of Ethiopia's recent war with Eritrea strong feelings of nationalism were visible across ethnic boundaries. Despite attempts to redefine what it means to be Ethiopian (or, in some cases, reject this label altogether), it is clear that popular support can still be mobilised in order to defend national interests (of course, the relatively high salaries received by soldiers also had a role in mobilising this support).

While it is not yet the time to announce the demise of Ethiopian nationalism, it is clear that the relationship between being Amhara, Christian, and Ethiopian is beginning to lose its strength. To question the concept of an 'Ethiopian' identity is to create space for the empowerment of other ethnicities and religions. Not only have Amhara lost political dominance in Jimma and other areas of southern Ethiopia, the Amhara region itself lacks valuable resources—coffee, Ethiopia's primary export, is not grown there—and has taken an economically peripheral position within the country (Clapham 2002). This combined with a questioning of Ethiopian cultural identity at both the government and popular levels makes for a clear contrast between Amhara dominance in the past and their current position of decline.

In this context the rumours I have analysed may serve a dual function. On the one hand, they are a form of political resistance. As noted above, rumours that attribute behavioural changes to spatial and political factors denaturalise identity. By associating these changes with conflict, an implicit argument is made that these emerging ethnic and religious identities are leading Ethiopia in a negative direction. At the same time, constructing narratives in which conflict comes from spatial instead of historical factors undermines the logic behind a policy of ethnic federalism. These rumours reinforce a perspective on Ethiopian ethnic relations in which ethnic federalism is not a result of conflict but a cause of it. On the other hand, while rumours may have political implications it is unlikely that they represent a conscious strategy. It seems that they are a device for coping with and making sense of the process of decline. Even outside of Jimma when I spoke with Amhara Christians they conveyed a sense of unease about the future. By talking and repositioning themselves in relation to other ethnicities and religions, Amhara Christians are able to explain the changes that are occurring around them and reinforce their own identity. This process may take many forms. For example, Cressida Marcus (2002) argues that a resurgence of Orthodox Christian religious activity among the Amhara is a response to a loss of economic and political power.

Marcus' research was conducted in the relatively homogenous city of Gondar in the Amhara region. Especially in ethnically diverse cities like Jimma, Amhara are continually reminded of the erosion of their cultural dominance and the questioning of an Ethiopian national identity. In this setting it is necessary to address the rise in power of the groups that one lives with, and rumours are produced that impact upon the way in which these new power relations are perceived. As decline occurs, the cultural institutions that were directly associated with the maintenance of power (i.e. Orthodox Christianity) take on a heightened importance. It would seem that these institutions become the sites for cultural battles that have significant political and economic implications.

CONCLUSION

The rumours and stories I have addressed encourage a conception of political change that goes beyond ethnic conflict. Everyday conversation surrounding the decline of drinking houses and the behaviour of Muslims made explicit connections between political power, ethnicity, and religion. I have argued that this discourse fits into the nationalist critique of ethnic federalism in the sense that it denaturalises ethnic and religious identity, and implies that ethnic federalism creates division and conflict. Histories collected from Oromo Muslim elders provide a counter-discourse that reveals how ethnic relations may also be constructed in a way that supports an ethnic regionalist perspective. While both of these discourses have an important relationship with the depiction of international Christian–Muslim tensions in news media, rumours surrounding the behaviour of Protestants indicate that it may not be useful to think about political change in terms of a conflict between Muslims and Christians. Orthodox Christian fears about the integrity of Ethiopia as a nation in a context of increased global economic and cultural flows are also an important force in the production of these rumours. In the end it seems that political change in Ethiopia is best understood as a complex interaction between ethnic identity, religion, and nationalism.

Rumour as a specific discursive form appears to be strongly influenced by both a local style of communication and a context of severe political–economic decline. Rumour is a means of spreading (generally negative) information about groups and individuals without taking direct responsibility for the validity of this information. In an environment where individuals fear repercussions for political resistance, rumour allows one to speak out against the government without putting one's self at risk. As individuals continue to react to rapid political change it is likely that the presence of rumours in day-to-day conversation will increase. It is through this everyday discourse that difference is continually marked and constructed. If these constructions of everyday difference are ignored, the full implications of political change may be lost or misunderstood.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an investigation of the relationship between identity, politics, and rumours in Jimma, Ethiopia. The introduction of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia after the fall of the Marxist Derg regime in 1991 has been the topic of a significant amount of academic discussion, but little attention has been given to the day-to-day experience of this change. Consequently, post-1991 Ethiopian politics have been viewed primarily in terms of ethnic power struggles. An analysis of rumours that are circulated through casual conversation enables a better understanding of popular reactions to ethnic federalism. In particular, rumours regarding the drinking habits of Oromo Muslims and the political behaviour of Protestants reveal that ethnicity is closely intertwined with religion and nationalism. This analysis also demonstrates how a particularly Ethiopian form of discourse functions as a means both of resisting and coping with loss of political power and economic decline. Finally, it explores how international news media coverage of Christian–Muslim conflict and anxieties about globalisation are interrelated with local power struggles. In this paper, rumours are treated as a discourse that provides a window into the worldview of the speaker in order to explore how individuals negotiate political change and construct difference at the everyday level.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce papier est une investigation sur la relation entre identité, politique et rumeurs à Jimma, en Éthiopie. L'introduction du fédéralisme ethnique en Éthiopie après la chute du régime marxiste *Derg* en 1991 a été le sujet de nombreuses discussions académiques, mais on s'est peu intéressé à l'expérience quotidienne de ce changement. C'est pourquoi la politique éthiopienne post-1991 a été essentiellement considérée en termes de luttes ethniques pour le pouvoir. Une analyse des rumeurs véhiculées dans la conversation ordinaire permet de mieux comprendre les réactions populaires vis-à-vis du fédéralisme ethnique. En particulier, les rumeurs sur les habitudes de consommation d'alcool des musulmans oromo et le comportement politique des protestants

révèlent que l'ethnicité est étroitement liée à la religion et au nationalisme. Cette analyse montre également la manière dont une forme particulièrement éthiopienne des fonctions du discours en tant que moyen à la fois de résistance et d'adaptation à la perte du pouvoir politique et au déclin économique. Enfin, il examine le lien entre, d'une part, le traitement par les organes d'information internationaux du conflit entre chrétiens et musulmans et des inquiétudes soulevées par la globalisation et, d'autre part, les luttes locales pour le pouvoir. Dans ce papier, les rumeurs sont traitées comme un discours qui ouvre une fenêtre sur la vision du monde du locuteur afin d'étudier la manière dont les individus négocient le changement politique et construisent la différence au quotidien.