'We are the same but different': Accounts of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Adherents of Islamic Sufi Saints

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Abstract

Construction of ethnic and religious identity is often described in academic works as being closely linked to the notion of othering (Jensen 2011). Lister (2004:102) notes on the signification of othering in identity formation mentioning, '… othering helps to define the self and to affirm identity'. Jensen (2009) in a similar manner describes that the notion is a quintessential one for understanding the power structures as well as the historic symbolic meanings of conditioning identity formation with variation in agency of different actors. In the political environment of post-1991 Ethiopia where ethnic federalism has made ethnicity the main organizing principle in forming, framing, and contesting different identity and resource claims in the country, the growing ethno-religious tensions in different parts of the country are often described as disputes arising from differences (Asnake 2013). Differences in religious ideologies, in political opinions, clash of interest in claims of political entitlements, in rights questions and more factors are identified as being the catalyst for inter-religious and inter group disputes in the country (IPSS 2012). On the other hand, faith institutions in some parts of Ethiopia are hosting people across ethnic and religious boundaries, a practice that at least contradicts to the dominant thesis of the escalation of social bordering and conflictual relations in the country. Examining the gap between local realities and macro level representation by political actors and scholars is beyond the scope of this article. The article rather explores and explains the social construction of religious boundary in contemporary Ethiopia by addressing how religious otherness is claimed or constructed at

the local level. The article presents the emic accounts on defining and redefining religious boundaries and analyzing the local perceptions and definitions of what a religious boundary is and what crossing the boundary entails.

Introduction

Academic works on religious rituals specifically pilgrimages in Ethiopia have presented how such rituals are double boundary-crossing phenomenon whereby pilgrims cross both religious and ethnic boundaries in the federated state where border formation and not border crossing is described to be the norm (Pankhurst 1994 a; 1994 b; Gibbs 1997). As a way of substantiating this general argument of double boundary crossing references are made to ethnographic case studies of a Christian pilgrimage center in eastern Ethiopia which accommodates Muslims and traditional belief adherents (Braukamaper 2004; Pankhurst 1994), an Islamic shrines attracting non-Muslim pilgrims (Hussein 2001; Ishihara 2009) and traditional belief pilgrimage centers appealing to Christians, Muslims and others (Aspen 2001; Asebe & Meron 2014). Braukämper (2004: 122) noted how in the cult of Muslim saints *awliya* ethnic and religious barriers are widely surmounted. Pilgrimages to holy places in different parts of Ethiopia are described to enhance social interaction across ethnic and religious boundaries. These works hence relate to the Turnerian paradigm of 'communitas' which emphasizes how pilgrimages often blur religious, ethnic and class boundaries of pilgrims and rather create a sense of communality among the pilgrims (Turner 1995; Albera & Couroucli 2012). Shared sacred spaces for pilgrimages have been discussed in different studies which highlight how different holy spaces are shared form people of different religious traditions and how sharing not contesting becomes the norm in these few instances. Such works include Uddin's (2008) paper on the Bonbibi worship (lady of the forest) in India and Bangladesh, Van der Veer's (1994) account on worship of Sufi saints by both the Sufis and Hindus participating at a Sufi pilgrimage in India, Pankhurst's (1994) work on Christian pilgrimage centers shared by Muslims and Christians in North Ethiopia. These and further discussions emphasize how holy places and pilgrimage centers become nodal points across differences.

Even though, a direct link has not been drawn between these writings and the notion of othering, the major arguments of those arguing in favor of communitas underplays a religious boundary formation process or the notion of othering. The over emphasis put on the higher degree of intermingling approaches such religious rituals like pilgrimages in a functionalist manner of serving the purpose of dissolving religious differences which gives the impression that on such occasions like pilgrimages religious boundaries tend to fade away and get lose.

There is a gap to address the agency of the local actors and their perspectives on how much participation in religious rituals of other religious institutions entails crossing a religious boundary. Most of these studies do not thoroughly engage with the emic accounts of religious boundary formation and religious boundary crossing phenomenon. Besides, they give the impression of the existence of a higher degree of flexibility in without being attentive to mechanisms of boundary maintenance.

On the bases of an empirical data obtained from Islamic shrines in Northeastern Ethiopia, this paper aims to contest this line of argument which equates the sharing of sacred space by adherents of different faiths with the narrowing down of ideological differences without paying due attention to how differences are rather locally stated[1]. The paper rather emphasizes the need to problematize and address how sacredness is constructed through various images, thus allowing adherents to define and redefine the sacredness of the shrine in different light at different times. All the adherents of the shrine despite differences in religious and ethnic backgrounds define the shrine as *ye tebareka bota* (sacred place), *tuhara* (clean) and *ye qidus sew manoriya* (the residence of holy man). All these phrases accentuate the sacredness of the shrine. However, how sacredness is perceived by one or the other adherent is highly related to which religious tradition she or he refers to as to be discussed in the paper.

The paper analyzes the cultural worlds of interlocutors who insist on emphasizing the salience of the religious boundary despite the pervasive act of crossing it. Accordingly, this paper seeks to answer, on the basis of emic

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accounts definitions of what a religious boundary is and what crossing the boundary in practice entails and how the religious otherness is socially constructed. Here I adopt Lister's definition of the concept of othering: 'it is process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between "us" and "them" – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained' (Lister 2004: 101). The paper hence discusses whether the local people define participation in religious rituals in other religious traditions other than their own as crossing a religious boundary and if not, what constitutes a 'real' act of crossing religious boundary in the emic account. As such, this article calls for a phenomenological approach that moves beyond the mere description of the social interaction as a 'mechanical mixing' between Christians, possession cult adherents, and Muslims or as a 'thinning out' (loosening) of religious boundaries.

By engaging with the local account the discussion in this paper goes beyond the main ideological/dogmatic differences often hypothesized as conventional markers of religious boundaries. On the basis of ethnographic material, the emic construction of religious boundary is analyzed by thoroughly engaging with the question. How Christian adherents of Islamic Sufi saints define religious boundary / religious otherness.

Brief Note on Sufism in Ethiopia and the Sufi Shrines of Mesal and Teru Sina

There are multiple Muslim constituencies in Ethiopia, though Ethiopian Muslims belong to the wider *Sunni Muslim* camp, predominantly following the Shafi'i school of thought (Desplat & Terje 2014). Sufism (mystical Islam) remains popular: the Qadiriyya order is widely practiced and in some places, such as in the Jimma area, the Tijaniyya order has attracted a large following (Ishihara 2009). Competing with Sufis inside an expanded Ethiopian public square there have been a wide variety of Islamic reform movements. Sufism was first introduced to Ethiopia from Yemen in the 16th century; the oldest and the most widespread Sufi order in Ethiopia being the *Qadiriyya*, which was first, introduced to Harar and then spread throughout the country (Braukämper 2004). Other Sufi orders in Ethiopia include the *Tijaniyya*, the *Shadhiliyya,* the *Sammaniyya* and the *Mirghaniyya* (Hussein 2001).

According to Trimingham (1952:233-234), the ideal-typical Sufism in Northeast Africa was 'vulgarized' to suit local realities. Yet Hussein Ahmed, the foremost scholar on regional histories of Ethiopian Islam, has painted Sufism in Ethiopia in a more positive light, even though he too recognized the 'bizarre' form it has taken in some areas and among some followers (Hussein 2001:84). According to Hussein (2001: 71), under the repressive political structure of Christian hegemony, Islam in Ethiopia was indebted to Sufi centers for its very survival; 'it was the expansion of the Sufi orders, the various centers of local pilgrimage which recruited converts to Islam, and laid the basis for the emergence of viable and prosperous Muslim communities in the countryside and towns of Ethiopian interior.' Sufi centers of learning in different parts of the country such as in Wällo, Harar and Bale have played an important role as centers of Islamic learning and also in the islamization process. Braukämper (2004:113) describes this phenomenon in eastern Ethiopia noting that, 'The success of islamization was to a considerable extent initiated by those saints whose shrines are still to be seen as centers of religious veneration and social interaction.'

Of the various Sufi practices, the most popular one in Ethiopia is saint veneration and the belief in the intercessory role of a *wäli* (saint or friend of God). Although there are no founders of a Sufi order in Ethiopia, the multitude of *Shaykhs* who have been initiated to the various orders are believed to have *Bərəkä* (blessing) which their clients seek to access in solving their everyday problems. Hararis considered a 'hub' of Muslim saints Gibb (1997: 92).

The discussion in this paper is based on an extensive ethnographic study conducted at two Sufi shrines; shrines of Mesal and Teru Sina located in Northern Ethiopia. Both shrines are dedicated to Sufi *shaykhs* who belonged to the *Qadiriryya1* brotherhood. The first shrine of Mesal is dedicated to the *shaykh* who founded the center in the early 19th century, *sheikh* Idris Umer. The second shrine of Teru Sina was founded by a Sufi *shaykh* Siraj Muhammad Amin. *Sheikh* Siraj is well known for his successful reconciliation of an inter ethnic dispute in the area in late 1930s and early 1940s; a legacy which had helped him in building close personal relationship with Emperor Haile Selassie I. Both shrines are located in Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) in Ethiopia. The shrine of Mesal is situated at Ansokia Gemza district Mekdessa kebele (peasant association) in North Shewa zone. The shrine of Teru Sina is located at Jille Dhmuga district of

Oromia Nationality zone in Amhara national regional state. The regional setting is a zone of interreligious encounters. In North Shewa zone 95% of the population is Orthodox Christian (2007 census). In Antsokia wereda 74,3% of the population is Orthodox Christian. In Jille Timuga 98% of the population is Muslim. North central and Northeastern Ethiopia is characterized by an exceptionally high degree of socio-cultural integration among diverse cultural communities. Five major ethnic groups live in the region: the Afar, the Agaw, the Amhara, the Argobba and the Oromo. The present-day North Shewa, North and South Wallo Zones of the Amhara National Regional State form a culture area reputed for social integration across religious and ethnic boundaries, an area described as 'a cultural and religious melting pot' (Aspen 2001: 65; Hussein 2001:2), as 'culturally hybrid environment' (Kelkilchew 1997:3), 'locus of convergence' (Setargew 2009:12-13), and a 'post modern social formation' (Abbink 2007:65). In order to avoid complications by referring to two administrative areas as North Shewa and South Wallo where the study has been conducted, I have adopted, following Setargew (2009: 3-5), a regional approach placing the study area within North Eastern Ethiopia to give the historical processes a wider perspective. As Abbink (2007:131) noted, 'Wallo [and North Shewa] in its 'traditional' religious intermingling and communal understandings perhaps even provides a model of '(post) modernity', where grand traditions meet, where unambiguous identities are doubtful, and where hybridity and interaction are emphasized.'

Founders of these shrines are described as descendants of the *Asqari* clan who claim a genealogical tie to the prophet Muhammad through Uthaman ibn Affan, the third *khalif*a (successor) to the prophet Muhammad, and his wife Ruqayya, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, who were amongst the refugees in the first hijra to Ethiopia (Trimingham 1952 2). Both centers have served as Islamic learning centers in the 20th century of young Muslims from different parts of the country and the horn of Africa at large. As such, the shrines of these famous *sheikhs* serve as nodes in a local network, creating congregating points for Islamic education.

However in their second generation and beyond, the shrines have lost their former reputation as Islamic learning centers and are rather known for hosting religious rituals, which are unanimously condemned as *bida'h* (innovation) by Islamic reformist movements (Meron 2014). Among such controversial rituals are the biannual pilgrimages hosted at both centers

locally described often as *ziyarat*. The tradition of making pilgrimages to visit a living or dead Sufi saint is common practice in Sufi traditions around the world (Werbner 2003; Lewis 1999). In Ethiopia, pilgrimage to holy places in general is so extensive that (Levine1974: 50) called it one of the 'pan-Ethiopian traits'. Notwithstanding the controversy surrounding the orthodoxy of the pilgrimage to the shrines of Sufi *sheikhs* as a legitimate Islamic religious practice, it continued to be practiced at Sufi centers throughout Ethiopia. Its salience is partly explained by various scholars in reference to the deeply entrenched traditional beliefs (Ishihara 2009).

The pilgrimages to the shrines take place on August 15th and October 15th and are attended by thousands of pilgrims from different parts of the country and the diaspora. Regarding the religious profile of the pilgrim to both shrines of Mesal and Teru Sina, more than seventy five percent of the pilgrims to these Islamic shrines are Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. The pilgrims are people from different walks of life; teachers, college students, businessmen, state officials, local farmers and members of the diaspora. In the context of ever hardening religious and ethnic boundaries in contemporary Ethiopia, extensive religious syncretism and profound local socio-cultural integration appears anomalous. The following section seeks to make sense of the emic construction of the religious other or the emic account on what a religious boundary is and what boundary crossing entails.

Emic Account on Religious Otherness/ Religious Boundary

During informal talks and interviews with most Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and *zar* adepts at these Sufi shrines, the author has observed a conjoint pattern in their attempts of justifying their presence at an Islamic shrine. They often tend to over emphasize the points of similarity or some crosscutting concepts existing in these different religious traditions. The Ethiopian orthodox Christians often infer to the tradition of saint veneration (*milja*), which is crosscutting both in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church traditions, and Sufi shrines. The cult of saint Mary and a myriad of saints by the followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Aspen 2001) according to accounts of these informants has softened the apparent religious boundary between Islam and Christianity in the wider region of Wallo/North Shewa. The Orthodox Christians allude that acts of participating in the Sufi shrine rituals and believing in Sufi *sheikh*s do not in any way entail crossing a

religious boundary. According to their accounts, such an act only entails a switch of personal references for instance, from Saint Mary to *sheikh Seid* or *shaykh Siraj*. Many EOC describe the pilgrimage to the shrines as part of the similar practice of *nigs* (pilgrimage to Ethiopian orthodox churches) and venerating saints. . In doing so, they selectively draw on a repertoire of the Orthodox Church tradition which recognizes saints and saint veneration as an element resonating to the practice of saint veneration among the Sufi. On the other hand, they accent the intra-religious boundary crossing as an act where by members of Islamic reformist movements visiting the shrine or members of the Protestant churches visiting the Ethiopian Orthodox churches. This is mainly because of the strong emphasis put on monotheism by the Islamic reformers and Protestants, which is conceptually incompatible with saint veneration, less with saint intercession. One informant explicates this as;

> *I am not only an ordinary Ethiopian Orthodox Christian but also a deacon [At this stage showing his identification card which states that he works in the Church]. The Muslims at the shrines have their own qidusan like us the Orthodox Christians. They call them wali, which in Amharic means qidusan. Thus, to come to the place of the qidusan is not wrong at all. What will be wrong is going to the pentes' (a blanket term used to refer to Pentecostals') church. Unlike the pentes, the Muslims here at Teru Sina know and revere the qidusan. The pentes, who rather claim to be Christians, do not know anything about the saints. But today we also have new forms of Islam, which are the r yeislam pente (pentes of the Muslim. The old Muslims know the qidusan[2] So they are like us the Orthodox Christians. These new Muslims called the 'Wahhabiyyas' are like the new Christians the Pente who deny the intercessory power of holy men. Even though these shrines belong to Muslim sheikhs, so long as we share this core value of paying homage and respect opt the. Coming here is like going to the church*

While identifying the agency of the Christian adherents in the overall phenomena of defining the religious boundary, the paper presents different

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[2] His notion of 'old' Muslim relates to the dominant local account of referring to the Islamic reformist movements as latecomers.

categories o. The first category consists of those Christian who appropriate the Islamic concept of *wali* within the framework of Christian sainthood (*qidusan*). These Christian adherents still maintain their religious identity as Orthodox Christians and clearly explain that their appearance to the Islamic shrine and their acts of approaching Islam is because of its resonance with Orthodox Christianity, especially in the area of sainthood. The justification given by the Christian pilgrims relates to the notion of 'finding of one's own in the other (Schenk 1989). Accordingly, Muslim saints are perceived to be 'extensions' of Christian saints, desired particularly because of their greater 'effectiveness'.

However one point that needs to be underscored is the fact that although both Muslims and Christians draw on the compatible concept of saint veneration and intercession to make sense of the religious participation across the religious boundary, none of them describe it as being an act of crossing a religious boundary. This often creates a sense of confusion for external observers on how to draw the boundary between the different religious traditions, which relates to the main question of the article. The main contention of this paper is the need to seriously engage with the agency of local actors (both practitioners and leaders of religious institutions) in how they conceive religious otherness and defining religious boundary/ies.

A scholarly inquiry needs to go one step ahead beyond a mere description of the resulting social interaction between Ethiopian orthodox Christians, traditional belief adherents and Muslims as a 'mechanical mixing' and try to engage with understanding the local accounts on defining religious boundaries This very much fits to Fredrick Barth's (1969) notion of boundary as something constructed through the attribution of subjective meaning with a variable signification of boundary markers. According to Barth (1969), an ethnic boundary can persist despite the flow of personnel across the boundary. What marks the boundary is subjectively defined in changing socio-political contexts.

The closest local term used to refer to a religious identity at the shrines is *ya haiymanot maninat* (lit. religious identity belonging). *Ya haiymanot maninat* is understood at the grassroots levels as a primordial type of identity which one obtains through her/his birth in a family associated to a certain religious tradition. According to the dominant account given by informants a religious boundary is thus demarcated by being a member of a particular religious community, as what Geertz calls the 'givens of social

existence' (Geertz 1973:259).

At the two Islamic Sufi shrines under discussion a religious identity is believed to be acquired by being born into a family of a particular religious group, which is principally apprehended in kinship terms. As such people make a sharp distinction between participation in rituals of other religious traditions and changing one's religious identity. For the Orthodox Christian adherents the religious boundary between Islam and Christianity would be crossed when it involves the three acts of: 1) failing to observe food taboos particularly eating ya *Islam siga* – (eating the meat slaughtered by Muslims), 2) changing ones own *haiymanot* (religion) through official conversion which sharply differs from having *emnat* (faith) in spirits other than the Christian God, and 3) failing to wear the *mahiteb* (the cord of faith). The three local variables of religious otherness will be elaborated in the following sections

For the Christian adherents the boundaries of participation are vividly marked by interdiction of consuming meat from animals that were slaughtered in the name of Allah. Hence food specifically meat is believed to set the religious boundary between Christians and Muslims, one of the three othering variables identified in this paper. Before slaughtering an animal, Orthodox Christians bless it in the name of the Holy Trinity - *Basime Ab -ba -Walid -ba Manfas qidu*s (in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit). Muslims, on the other hand, proceed with the slaughtering only after rehearsing the *shihada - Bismillah ir-Rahman ir –Rahim* (in the name of God, the most gracious and most compassionate). The *zar* spirit possession cult adepts slaughter the animal after clearly stating the name of the respective spirits the sacrifice is addressed to. A Christian pilgrim, at the shrine of Teru Sina has explained the salience of the symbolism of the knife in marking religious boundary as follows;

> *My coming to an Islamic shrine for the annual pilgrimage cannot in any way be used against me as evidence to converting and s changing my Christian religious identity. That can only be changed if I eat the meat slaughtered at this shrine by the Muslims. I do not even dare to touch the meat they have slaughtered let alone eat it. It is only if I touch that that I would be considered as a convert crossed the religious boundary. As you have seen here we come with our own sheep, our own knifes, cooking pots, plates and cups to avoid menekakat (contamination). Islami ka kirityan yamileyen bilawa*

> *bicha naw (what sets the Muslims and the Christians apart is only the knife) this is the main element that sets the boundary..*

The following account by a Muslim also sheds a similar light on the role of meat as a signifier of the inter religious boundary;

> *Even though you see Christians flocking to Islamic shrines in this area, you will never come across a single Christian who eats an animal slaughtered by Muslims. But nowadays there are those who are called pentes amongst us the Muslims and the Christians. These pentes of the Christians and the Muslim Wahhabiyyas are like a starved hyena that would not pass any meat or food. They just eat whatever they come across and whatever they are offered. and whatever they find edible. But they both claim being the authentic Christians and Muslims without even property knowing the ḥarām and the halāl in food. They talk much about bida'h but what is more bida'h than disregarding a ḥarām?*

There is a common practice among the Ethiopian Jews where by the boundary between them and Muslims is partly defined by avoiding the consumption of meat slaughtered by the other group (Hagar 1999). In a similar manner Fiquet has observed a similar practice in Wollo (Ficquet 2006).

The strict enforcement of the code of dietary separation amidst highly syncretic religious practices perhaps suggests the idea of pushing boundary markers to the symbolic level. This is an exceptional example of 'overstating' a difference in the context of a greater accent on similarities. Restricted commensality therefore enables the Christian adherents 'to eat the cake and have it at the same time'. The use of knife to slaughter the animal is the reason why it is used as a symbol of marking the religious boundary. The knife is used discursively to sharpen a boundary, which is otherwise blunted by the extensive crossing in the pragmatics of everyday life like in participation in each other's religious congregations. The food avoidance is locally accented as the *gidigida* (wall) dividing the religious other and marking the religious boundary at a grassroots level. During the pilgrimage to both shrines of Teru Sina and Mesal the meal prepared for the Christian and Muslim pilgrims was cooked separately. The avoidance of each other's meals

goes to the extent of not sharing the same cooking utensils. In most parts of Ethiopia, it is common to find different restaurants and butchers for Muslims and Christians *Ya Islam siga* (meat slaughtered by the Muslims) and *ya kirsisitiyan siga* (meat slaughtered by Christians) has been also institutionalized by the state in the form of a separate slaughter house for Muslims and Christians within the central state abattoir in Addis Ababa known as *Qera* as well as in the regional capital cities.

The second variable setting the boundary relates to emic accounts on accenting differences between *emnat* (faith) and *haymanot* (religion). In the accounts of the local Christian adherents at these Sufi shrines, *haymanot* is a religious identity that one acquires by being born in to a certain religious group or being born in to a family with a specific religious background. As such a religious identity is conceived in primordial terms. Changing ones own *haymanot* is locally believed to incur the anger of the ancestors as it is equated to conversion, which is changing one's own, and the religious identity of the family and identifying oneself with the religious 'other'. These second category of Christian adherents presented here are hence the ambivalent; those Christians who are deeply enchanted by Muslim saints whom they describe as more concrete, incorporated in bodily forms by being placed in their tombs unlike the Christian *qidusan*. They emphasize on the generational proximity of Muslim saints to the living and their greater accessibility than the Christian angels and saints as a way of accounting for their belief in Muslim saints and taking part in different rituals in the Islamic institution which is rather conventionally conceived and defined as the 'other'. As a way of reconciling there 'awkward' position, the Christian pilgrims and adherents of the Sufi *sheikhs* make distinction between *emnat* (faith) and *haiymanot* (religion). Religion is locally signified as a primary form of social identity; whereas faith is the belief in something, which is effective. The typical way of accounting for such state of ambivalence can be inferred from the common statement of informants at both centers 'I believe in the intercessory role of the Muslims *sheikhs* but I am still Orthodox Christian'. This can best be inferred from the account of the Christian pilgrim quoted here;

> *Even though I was born to an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian family, I* had my own *emnat*, which differs from my families and my own haymanot .*I am a devoted Christian who goes regularly to the church*

> *on Sundays to attend the weekly mass. If one finds a thorny bush or a weed edible, and bearing sweet fruits than a decent orange tree in his farm, one is free to keep the weed and believe in the general fact that the weed is more productive than the orange tree. So he can bear his fruit from the two trees without uprooting the orange in his garden. Because in case he uproots the orange tree then the life of the weed will also be short. Emnat and haiymanot are just like that. One can believe in anything effective without leaving his forefathers' religion. If one dares to convert and leave his ancestors' religion then he or she will find her/himself in trouble. That is why we are firm in our religion despite the fact that we have faith in Muslims saints.*

The allegory of the orange and the weed is the one shared by many Christian pilgrims at both shrines. Like their Christian counterparts, Muslims make distinction between *din* and *imān*. In local connotations *din* is something inborn, 'in the blood', most Muslim adherents and leaders of the shrine put it;

> *Human beings can have faith in other human beings or animals if they believe that those are worth believing in. But that does not mean that by doing so we are converting or giving up on our religious identity as these are two different things like harāmaba and qobo [an idiomatic expression to describe unlikely (unrelated) condition]. I might believe that the Şabäl of the Christians has more curative power than du'a. But this is only an imān (to have faith). But believing in its healing power does not mean that I am giving up on my din, which is Islam. Neither can it in any way mean conversion. My religious identity is something, which cannot be washed away by the Şabäl. It is in my blood. Can you wash away your blood? No, so it is just like that*

The Ethiopian orthodox Christians thus show greater loyalty and faith in the effectiveness of the Muslim saints. They emphasize how the Christian angels and saints are far removed from everyday life, though they are perceived to be still more accessible than the transcendental God (*Igziabiher*) who is too revered to be directly approached. Christian saints are described by this set of Christian adherents as being either global or national whereas the Muslim saints are locally rooted and existed within a living memory.

The third variable used by the local Ethiopian Orthodox Christian adherents of the Islamic Sufi shrine is the *mahiteb / kir* (thread) (Tadesse 1959). *Mähitəb or kir* is a bundle of thread used as a cord of faith to symbolize baptism and Orthodox Christian identity in general and is worn around the neck. Christening ritual marks the initiation of a child into the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Boys are baptized and christened on their 40th day while baptism for girls takes place on the 80th day after they were born. In order to symbolize their new Christian identity, a thread of three different colors is tied around the neck of the newly baptized children. The three different colors of the mahiteb are red, white and black symbolizing the Holy Trinity. This is a common phenomenon for the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians especially those residing in the rural parts of the country. Many Orthodox Christian and Muslim pilgrims to the Islamic Sufi shrines draw the religious boundary in reference to *mahiteb*. The Amharic phrase used as a metaphor to refer to conversion from Christianity to Islam is *mahitebun betese* (lit. 'He/she gave up on the *mahiteb*'). One Christian informant described the significance of the *mahiteb* as an inter religious boundary marker as follows;

> *Mahiteb is what sets the Christians and Muslims apart. All my children have been baptized and have their mahiteb. My parents used to have it when they were alive and so did my grandparents. Look at my neck, I have the mahiteb here and thus I am a Christian. That is what sets us apart. It is only when I throw this valuable thread that I can be labeled as a selemte (a Muslim Convert).*

This excerpt clearly illustrates how religious boundary is locally set and defined at emic level with the *mahiteb* having the significant symbolic value of marking the religious boundary.

In rural parts of Ethiopia especially among the Amhara, a strong emphasis is given to the *mahiteb*. The popular song by the legendary Ethiopian pop musician Tewdros Kassahun (Teddy Afro) whose songs touch upon various current social, political and religious issues is a best example that sheds light on the local definition of a religious boundary[3]. Based on a

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[3] Songs are ways of communicating everyday social realities as often described by ethnomusicologists (Shelemay 2011).

true story, in one of his famous songs entitled *Shemendefer,* Tedi Afro describes what crossing the Muslim-Christian boundary entails in the Ethiopian context. This is expressed in a romantic love between a Christian woman and a Muslim man who met during a pilgrimage to Qulubi, a popular Christian pilgrimage center in eastern Ethiopia dedicated to Saint Gabriel. The lyrics aptly capture the paradox – the simultaneous boundary crossing and boundary-maintenance.

Some of the Christian adherents who occupy an ambivalent position between Orthodox Christianity and Sufi Islam ultimately convert to Islam The converts are locally called selemtes who have been converted to Islam considered to be second class Muslims by Muslims than the *tawalaj Muslim* (born Muslims). From the accounts of the sets of Christians mentioned above we can see that some informants shifted between resisting and embracing othering.

Conclusion

As the discussion in this paper clearly shows there is inconsistency between the dominant discourse on the tightening of religious and ethnic boundary in post 1991 Ethiopia and the lived reality at grassroots level, which rather show the fuzziness of religious boundaries in northeastern Ethiopia. Academic discourses surrounding pilgrimage and how pilgrimages enhance states of communitas among pilgrims mainly limit their arguments to the functionalist explanation of the function of such interactions. This gives the impression of an existing blurry religious boundary between different religious traditions. Such works do not engage with the local accounts of maintaining differences or demarcations of religious boundary a gap this paper has anticipated to contribute to.

This paper argues that in order to get a clear and holistic perspective of what crossing the religious boundary in a given context entails, scholars need to be attentive to local account. As (Jensen 2009:6) noted 'the study of social identity is the study of the interplay between situatedness and agency'. The context and the local meanings attached to the practices vary tremendously and such variation can be understood only if due attention is given to emic accounts. This allows us to simultaneously engage with boundary - crossing and boundary maintenance in local terms. For the

Orthodox Christian adherents of the shrines the religious boundary between Islam and Christianity is locally constructed and thus crossing a religious boundary is not a mere flow of personnel across the physical sacred spaces. It rather involves three major acts discussed in the text: failure to observe the food taboo (eating the meat slaughtered by Muslims and vice versa); failure to wear or remove the *mahiteb* (the cord of faith worn by Orthodox Christians around their neck), and changing ha*ymanot* (religion). Hence by setting these three variables, the discussion in the paper has shown how actors specifically local adherents juxtapose similarity and differences while accounting for their presence at t a religious institution which otherwise is defined as the other.

Furthermore the discussion in this paper has elucidated that one needs to be cautious of the heterogeneity with in a religious group while discussing agency of different actors in defining what entails crossing a religious boundary at emic level. While identifying the agency of the Christian adherents, the discussion in the paper has shown different groups of adherents. The first groups consist of people who appropriate the Islamic concept of *wali* within the framework of Christian sainthood. These Christian adherents still maintain their religious identity as Orthodox Christians. They approach Islam not because it is different from Christianity but rather because of its resonance with Orthodox Christianity, especially in the area of sainthood. The other category of Christian adherents are deeply enchanted by Muslim saints who are more concrete, incorporated in bodily forms and placed in their tombs. Some of the Christian adherents on the other hand mainly those who occupy an ambivalent position between Orthodox Christianity and Sufi Islam ultimately convert to Islam.

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