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Religion and politics in post-1991 Ethiopia: making sense of Bryan S. Turner's 'Managing Religions'

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ABSTRACT

Bryan S. Turner's concept of managing religion postulates that it is the modern state's prerogative to exert some degree of control over religions. For Turner, this is important because of increasing religious revival and the challenges it poses to public order and security. Turner describes two main approaches to managing religion, namely upgrading and enclavement. The former refers to modernising or 'partial secularisation' of a given religious institution or group while the latter is a tactic of isolating a certain community of believers. Turner's two approaches are developed to analyse contexts affected by recent migration. While concurring with the efficacy of upgrading and enclavement, in this article, I argue that states adapt different mechanisms depending on the context that necessitates their intervention. Based on ethnographic research conducted in Ethiopia, I introduce cooptation and repression as two additional approaches used by authoritarian states in countries that are less affected by migration.

Introduction

Following the change of regime in 1991 that led to the emergence of an ethnic coalition known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Ethiopia adopted ethnic federalism and secularism. This created fertile ground for the accentuation of identity politics. The increased visibility of religion as a strong political force in this highly inflated domain of identity politics has led the Ethiopian state to take various measures in its management of religions. In this article, I will identify two modes of management adopted by the state to control the resurgence of religion in political affairs: cooptation and repression. Drawing on Bryan S. Turner's concept of managing religion as a state intervention to control religions, I use the term cooptation as an appropriation of religion in the service of the status quo and repression as an act of subduing, intimidating and outlawing religious associations, groups or figures that are considered to be a threat to state power. The primary data for this article were obtained from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Oromia regional state between 2011 and 2015 with a particular focus on Waqqeffana (the religion of the Oromo) and the Irreecha,

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an annual thanksgiving ritual. Interviews and focus group discussions, participant observation and collection of archival materials, including videos, newspapers and letters, have informed my arguments.[1]

The article is organised as follows: I begin by discussing Turner's concept of managing religions with a focus on his concepts of upgrading and enclavement. I then proceed to provide the context for the interaction of religion and the state in post-1991 Ethiopia. This is followed by a detailed description and analysis of the management of the Oromo religion within the framework of the following two additional concepts that I have coined in order to build on Turner's model: cooptation and repression.

Managing religions: upgrading and enclavement

The secularisation thesis postulates that processes of differentiation and modernisation will lead to the relegation of religion to the private realm and finally, to its complete disappearance (Berger 1969). However, scholarship on religion and politics began questioning the secularisation thesis, stressing that modernisation has not resulted in the declining relevance of religion in the public life of societies. José Casanova (1998), for instance, proposed the concept of 'deprivatisation'[2] of religion and suggested that a more productive approach to understanding the complex interaction of religion and politics in the public sphere begins by first acknowledging religion as an element that shapes political life in multiple ways. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (2008) reconsidered his position, which was to see the public sphere as a site of rational deliberation where only the secular has prominence and religion is rendered inadmissible because it hampers rational engagement. Habermas has more recently argued that we live in a 'post-secular' era in which religion is an integral part of the political life of citizens. Citizens' political participation in the public sphere is informed by their religious convictions. Both Casanova and Habermas imply that there should be a way of managing religion to make it compatible with and befitting to the modern public sphere.[3] It is in this context of realising the resurgence and increasing visibility of religion that Turner developed the concept of managing religions to describe intervention by the state to regulate the religious domain. Turner 2007a argues that 'because religion is important in modern life as a carrier of identity, it has to be controlled by the state to minimise the costs to government, even in constitutional settings that overtly espouse the separation of [religion] and state.'

The management of religion presupposes that there are certain actions any state needs to take to ensure that the presence of religion in the public sphere is not threatening to public order and stability. It should be the state's duty 'to re-assert its authority over civil society, especially over those religious institutions that seek to articulate an alternative vision of power and truth, […] if it is to command over and above other claims of membership' (Turner 2007a, 124). Turner's underlying assumption is that the secular state is challenged by multiculturalism and religious diversity as the results of increased mobility and migration, both legal and illegal. The challenges that force states to manage religion come from the emergence of 'religious complexities' which in turn create 'new burdens' on the countries. If states are to successfully curb the challenges posed by religious complexities, they 'can no longer rely on the conventional division between politics and religion, and have entered into a new phase that involves the direct management of religions. Liberal states have evolved from policies of benign

neglect to the active management of religious activities' (Turner 2007a, 124).[4] Upgrading and enclavement are the two forms of state intervention identified by Turner.

Upgrading

Upgrading is a form of managing religions. It follows a trend where the state influences religions so that they fit the state's expectations. It is a way of modernising religions, which entails 'partial secularisation' to make religion suitable to the standards of democratic regimes. Religions are upgraded through the use of various methods like educational strategies and the integration of minority groups, so they abandon their religious and cultural distinctiveness and adjust to the mainstream ways of life (Barbalet, Possamai, and Turner 2011). Upgrading manifests itself 'through the arenas of religion, morals, reproduction and family life' (Barbalet, Possamai, and Turner 2011, 3). It is an inclusive approach that attempts to boost the educational status of the religious population so that it is ready for a modern form of citizenship that is attuned to the secular order. To explain upgrading, Turner uses Islam as an example:

> strategies that are involved [in upgrading Islam] include educational policies to raise the educational level of Muslim communities, including providing an educational improvement of Muslim leaders, especially the mullahs. It also involves providing legislation to give Muslim women security, opportunities in education, and encouragement to enter the open marriage market, thereby rejecting arranged marriages. It may also involve inducements to abandon the veil or other forms of modesty and seclusion. Finally, these forms of government also involve opposition to what are seen to be brutal criminal law decisions, such as amputation. In short, liberal management of religion is intended to modernise Islam through a set of procedures that bring about a partial secularisation of Islam. (Turner 2007a, 124)

Upgrading also comports with Habermas's (2008) proposition where he calls, in what he refers to as the post-secular era, for the inclusion of religion as long as it does not interfere with the rational deliberations taking place between citizens of diverse convictions within the public sphere. It is inferable that in order to make religion 'friendly' to the public sphere, upgrading is necessary. Therefore, as far as upgrading goes, change is imposed from the outside, mainly by the state whose responsibility is to manage religious insurgence as a result of growing migration.

Enclavement

Enclavement is used to describe a situation in which religious communities are rendered immobile because their infiltration in the sociopolitical domain is perceived as a potential threat. The state resorts to policies of containment where it isolates religious groups whose presence it considers detrimental. According to Turner 2007a 'to enclave a community is to lock it up but this does not mean, especially now in the era of advanced technologies, the construction of physical barriers, rather, the use of other alternatives to enclave a certain religion or religious community which is found incompatible with the modern state and which is perceived as a threat to the security of the state.' Enclavement, as an extreme form of managing religions, involves policies of seclusion, which could result in a high degree of alienation of a certain religious group.

Enclavement emerged following some strong criticisms against policies of upgrading which countries like Britain followed, proving futile as they imposed reforms that were not desired by the religious groups.

Turner developed the concept of enclavement to show how it works in the context of what he called an 'immobility regime', referring to a state's attempt to halt mobility in order to discourage migration and labour movement. He argues against the truism that globalisation implies the fluidity of borders by demonstrating the methods used by the state to enclave migrants. Enclavement is the 'segregation and containment of social groups' through various means like 'enclosure, bureaucratic barriers, legal exclusions, and registration' (Turner 2010, 244). It is an approach that makes certain spaces strictly inaccessible to some religious communities. It is a pre-emptive intervention intended to keep religious communities at bay even before they are able to cross any borders. Thus, physical exclusion is at the centre of enclavement. The mobility of religious groups is curtailed by applying extreme forms of control like building walls, gating, biological means and registration, as well as putting in place difficult and complex bureaucratic procedures. Sequestration, storage and seclusion are the three principal forms of enclavement used by the state to regulate spaces. These measures are military-political, social and cultural, and biological. There are also technologies and mechanisms that can be used by the state to track down religious groups and individuals and spatially exclude them. Enclavement responds to the 'paradigm of suspicion' (Turner 2007b, 289) and fear towards immigrants. Even more so, it is a response to the threat of terrorism that escalated after 9/11. According to Turner, enclavement is, at a fundamental level, a hostile reaction to Muslim immigrants in the West (Turner 2007b).

In order to show how upgrading and enclavement work, Turner focused on Singapore as a country that is subject to a high influx of migrants from the surrounding countries as a result of which it became multicultural and multireligious. He argued that in Singapore, religious enclaves are created as the state divides the population along such ethnic categories as Chinese, Malay and Indian. These categories are also religious because each group tends to subscribe to one religion: Chinese migrants are usually Buddhist, Malays Muslim and Indians Hindu. While enclaving others, the state in Singapore simultaneously focuses on upgrading Islam through different means of empowering the Malay people in order to solve the 'Malay Problem' which appears to be economic and social underdevelopment. By elevating the living standards of the Malays, they are upgraded to joining the community of Singapore, which is modern and secular (Turner 2011). The act of upgrading some groups is predicated on the enclavement of others, making these coexisting mechanisms.

The impetus for managing religion through upgrading and enclavement increases the more religious groups assert themselves in the public sphere. This is more visible in secular contexts such as Singapore, Britain, France, Germany, USA and Australia because of ongoing waves of migration to these countries. In such contexts, managing religion is necessary to tackle the imagined or real risk associated with Islam's alleged link with terrorism and fundamentalism. As problematic as they might be, these two approaches, as they have been deployed in these countries, are meant to either secularise religions or get rid of those that are not prone to change. While these two approaches might suit the contexts in which they were developed, the question remains whether or not one could use them to analyse the management of religions in countries which are less

affected by migration. In this article, I argue that the concept of managing religions goes beyond enclavement and upgrading. After briefly discussing the political context of managing religions in Ethiopia, I will introduce cooptation and repression as additional approaches in view of expanding Turner's concept of managing religions in different religious and political landscapes.

Religion and the state in post-1991 Ethiopia

Religion and the Ethiopian state have an established link that dates back to the introduction of Christianity to the Aksumite kingdom in the fourth century AD. Until the outbreak of the 1974 revolution, the Ethiopian empire gave Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity considerable political power as a state religion. In 1974 the revolution brought to the political scene a socialist regime replacing emperor Haile Selassie I. One of the immediate reforms of the revolution was the adoption of secularism, officially introducing a separation between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the state. In addition, relative freedom was granted to other religions like Islam, Catholicism and evangelical Christianity. Nevertheless, in practice, religion remained a strong force in the political apparatus of socialist Ethiopia.

After 17 years of civil war, Ethiopia experienced a political transformation in 1991 under the leadership of an ethnic coalition known as EPRDF. Ethnic federalism was introduced as a basis of organisation, whereby the country was federated along ethnic lines. This made ethnicity the main pillar of identity in the competition for representation. Although at face value religion seemed to be less important in subsequent Ethiopian identity politics, as rightly pointed out by Feyissa (2011), it gained strength in the public sphere owing to the fertile ground created by the constitutional provision on religious freedom. In the newly enshrined constitution, the state guaranteed all citizens the right to follow previously suppressed cultural as well as religious practices. As alluded to in article 27 of the 1995 constitution, 'everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include the freedom to hold or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and the freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.'

Article 11 of the constitution further stipulates that there shall be no state religion and there is a constitutional wall that separates state and religion. There shall be no interference of one in the other's affairs. However, due to the increased politicisation of religion, in the last few years the state was alarmed and thus began to intervene in religious affairs. Describing this scenario, Haustein and Østebø (2011) concede that even though the state is secular, experience shows conditions where the government monitors religious activities. They further describe that despite its claim to distance itself from religious affairs, the state 'has not fully succeeded in keeping religion and politics apart [...] the ruling party has been carefully monitoring the space it has provided, and has on numerous occasions interfered in religious matters' (Haustein and Østebø 2011: 768). Following the same line of argument, Feyissa (2011) highlights how the state perceives religious revival as a threat to its emancipatory projects. As a result, leaders become impatient, frequently seeking regulatory interventions in religious affairs.

In a more recent publication, Abbink (2014) takes up the debate with regard to the state and religion by analysing the 2011–2014 protest by Ethiopian Muslims who were opposed to state intervention in the affairs of Islam. Clearly, this development put to the test the Ethiopian experiment with secularism. Abbink further argues that the state's insecurities in relation to Islam induced intervention which in turn led to a continued conflict between the Muslim community and the state. While scholars have paid attention to religion and politics in Ethiopia, the main focus so far is on Islam and Christianity (Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, evangelical and Pentecostal groups). Nevertheless, other religions are emerging as strong political forces which are worth of further attention, as will be shown below with the example of the Oromo religion. Abbink's framing of the state's response to the Muslims as something that partly emanates from 'insecurities of the state' is an interesting point of entry to what I will be describing and analysing below in the case of managing the Oromo religion.

Waqqeffana and Irreecha

The Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. They are followers of three main religions, namely, Islam, Christianity (of various denominations) and an indigenous religion known as Waqqeffana which is professed by 3% of the Oromo population (CSA 2007). The name Waqqeffana is derived from *Waaqa*, the supernatural entity worshiped by the Oromo (Melba 1988).[5] *Waaqa* is considered omnipotent, omnipresent and benevolent. *Waaqa* is also described as non-punitive, just and loving. Although *Waaqa* is at the centre of Oromo religion, there are also benevolent spirits, known as *ayyana*, which serve as mediators. *Ayyana* spirits select and possess some women and men who are then called *qallitti* and *qallu*, respectively. According to Megerssa (2005), *ayyana* (spirit), *uma* (creature) and *safu* (ethics) are the three pillars of thought or world view of the Oromo. *Waaqa* created the universe and its contents through *ayyana*. The universe and its contents are called *uma*. *Safu* stands for the moral and legal principles that guide the interaction of humans with *Waaqa, ayyana* and *uma*. *Safu* captures and is built on the Oromo notion of respect extended to the three entities (Megerssa 2005). Every *uma* is believed to have an *ayyana* of its own that is assigned to it by *Waaqa* for guidance and protection. Knowing *safu* presupposes knowing *Waaqa* and *uma*. The breach of *safu*, which is considered a sin, results in *Waaqa*'s withdrawal (Kelbessa 2001). These three notions are interdependent and the understanding of one rests on grasping the others. Performing rituals that are dedicated to revering *Waaqa, ayyanas* and *uma* is an aspect of revering *safu* and hence securing *Waaqa*'s continued presence and support. The Irreecha ritual of prayer and thanksgiving is one of the major rituals that are performed to show appreciation for *Waaqa*'s provisions.

Irreecha is one of the most popular rituals performed by the Oromo and other ethnic groups as a symbolic action that transcends the division between humans and the divine. The Oromo recognise the existence of *Waaqa* through what it created and the order in the universe. The interconnectedness of rain, sunshine, harvest, health and wealth is a symbol of how *Waaqa* operates in the world. Irreecha is a ceremony by which humans recognise the persistent and consistent provisions bestowed by *Waaqa*. It is a collective performance that is held seasonally depending on what each season is believed to bring with it.[6] Transitioning from season to season without any disaster on

mankind is one of the major reasons the Oromo gather to show their gratitude. There are two major annual rituals known as Irreecha Tulu (mountain) and Irreecha Melka (lake). The former ritual is held just before the coming of the expected rainy season. People gather on sacred hilltops to pray for rain. It is a moderately sized gathering which is confined to a small area. The latter ritual, Irreecha Melka, is held by the sacred lakeside to express gratitude for the rain and for the transition to the sunny spring.

The Irreecha Melka that is held at Hora Arsedi is the main annual celebration. It is mostly celebrated either on the last Sunday of September or the first Sunday of October. Hora Arsedi is a sacred lake located in the city of Bishoftu in Oromia, a city which is located about 45 km east of Addis Ababa. It is a site highly regarded for its spiritual power, to the extent that a significant number of participants believe that spirits reside inside the lake and on the sacred tree located by the lakeside.[7] The Irreecha Melka that is held at Hora Arsedi has grown to be the largest celebrated ritual in the entire Oromia region. Every year millions of Oromo and members of other ethnic groups come to participate in the celebration. Participants come from various religious backgrounds, Christians, Muslims and Waqqeffatas. It has also attracted politicians from the federal state, the Oromia regional government and opposition groups.[8] Thus, Irreecha has become something not only of a spiritual value but also of social, cultural, political and economic significance among the Oromo of Ethiopia. I will use Waqqeffana and Irreecha to elaborate on the management of religions by the state through repression and cooptation.

What prompted repression and cooptation?

The case of Waqqeffana

The Oromo religion saw a revival after the change of government in Ethiopia in 1991. This revitalisation owes much to the newly introduced framework known as ethnic federalism, in tandem with a growing nationalist sentiment which advocates a return to the indigenous. Waqqeffana exploited the constitutional provision of religious freedom by using publicity as an identity signifier. This religious revival and its symbolic significance in representing the Oromo ethno-religious identity can be better understood when considered against the backdrop of the Christian empire, which was mainly dominated by the so-called Abyssinians. The incorporation of the Oromo into the Christian empire, which is regarded by some as a colonial experience (Jaleta 2005, 2007) and by others as part of processes of state formation (Kebede 1999), has, together with internal changes, weakened the Oromo's previous social, economic, religious and political standing.[9] As a result, the revival of Waqqeffana following the change of government in 1991 is not just the restoration of an old religious tradition but an ideological movement that is reinvented and essentialised to foster distinctness and national pride in relation to the 'other'. Thus, its vibrant public presence as an identity marker is not taken lightly by the state and ethno-nationalist Oromo intellectuals and politicians. The state perceives it as a threat because of the significant influence it has in mobilising and organising the Oromo to claim political as well as cultural spaces of representation.

The first attempt to revive Waqqeffana as a religious institution in its own right was made in 2000, and in December 2003 the first Waqqeffana Followers Association (henceforth known as the Association) secured legal recognition by the Ministry of

Justice of the Federal State of Ethiopia. The Association envisioned an institutionalisation of the religion with its own dogmas and doctrines. It also aimed at teaching Christian and Muslim Oromo to return to their 'original' religion. In a short time, it gained popularity among people ranging from ordinary members of society to the educated elite and influential politicians, some of whom openly[10] opposed the current regime for its failure to deliver what it promised. It became one of the associations that mobilised the Oromo behind a common agenda, making the Ethiopian state wary of the Association's increasing visibility in the urban centres, including the federal capital Addis Ababa.[11] As a result, in February 2004, a few months after the licence of legal recognition was granted, it was revoked. The reason given was that the Association was divisive and a threat to security because of its link with a civil society association known as Mecha and Tulema Association (henceforth MTA). The MTA's membership is alleged to have advocated for the right to self-determination of the Oromo, which was and still is a hot-button political issue in the country. Because of this, the new religious Association was short-lived. This development raises questions: What was the Association's link to MTA and why was such a link a reason for its final banning?

According to Gemechu Olana, one of the founding members, the Waqqeffana Followers Association owes a great deal to MTA for its foundation. MTA organised its educated members to work in collaboration with the elderly to gather the necessary information and to finance the Association at its formative stage. Gemechu Olana continued,

> We started the movement in 2000 but faced some challenges that we could not continue smoothly. MTA was our custodian and umbrella. In 2003, with the help of MTA, we resumed it until they [the Ministry of Justice of the Federal State of Ethiopia] banned it 2004. Then in 2008 we started getting together clandestinely and in a less organised manner. We gathered under a big tree, like our ancestors did. The government did not like us and when they found out that we were gathering every Sunday, they sent [the] police and forced us to evacuate that place. They made comments hinting at our alleged connection with MTA and that we were plotting against the country's unity.[12]

Why is such a link with MTA a problem for the state? In order to answer this question, a brief historical detour is needed to assess MTA in light of the country's political history. MTA was a self-help association established in 1963. The initial rationale for its formation was to provide assistance to the Oromo and other ethnic groups who lived in poverty. However, within a few years of its foundation, it adopted a quasi-political agenda and began to mobilise the Oromo to be conscious of their cultural heritage and demand political power within the existing structure. This was alarming to the then-ruler Emperor Haile Selassie I and as a result he banned MTA in 1967. In addition to its banning, the leadership was arrested and some prominent figures, like Tadesse Biru and Mamo Mezemer, were sentenced to life imprisonment or death for treason. According to Mohammed Hassen (1998), the dismantling of MTA did not kill the spirit of national consciousness but rather led to the awakening of most Oromo elites who were hitherto politically uninvolved. After a 27-year ban, MTA was permitted to reopen in 1994 and from then on members began to actively engage in the socio-economic, religious, cultural and political life of the Oromo. The MTA's involvement in the political and religious affairs of the country was manifested mainly in encouraging the public to become more conscious of their status and demand political spaces for the Oromo. Such political agendas were and are still depicted by the state and some unionist politicians

as 'narrow nationalist' and 'anti-unity'. Everything the MTA advocated was part of this discourse and against the order maintained by the state. As a result, the government became uneasy with MTA's presence in all spheres, including the Waqqeffana Followers Association.[13] The Association was outlawed and repressed due partly to such links with MTA, a group that supported secessionist agendas. Here, we witness a form of managing religion in which 'dangerous' religious groups that have a political overtone are repressed or outlawed even though the constitution supports their existence. Applying such strategies helps the state to curb threats, imagined or real, posed by a religious group that has exerted political influence. In this case, the state claimed to have detected a divisive political agenda propagated by the religious group. And yet, the Association had received the needed permission to operate as a legal religious entity.

The case of Irreecha

Historically, the thanksgiving ritual has undergone many incarnations. During the imperial regime (1930–74), it was an open celebration that brought together a significant number of participants from different ethnic groups, the Oromo making up the majority. It was characterised by a festive atmosphere. There were various perceptions of the ritual but the dominant one was that it was a superstitious practice that stood against the dominant Ethiopian Orthodox Christian tradition. During the military regime (1974–91), the ritual was discouraged as something that distracted people from focusing on progress and development. As a result, the festive nature of the ritual was degraded, leading to a decrease in the number and diversity of participants (Debele 2015). But since the 1990s it not only became a national symbol for the Oromo population living in Ethiopia but also a symbolic representation of the ethno-religious identity for the Oromo living abroad. It is now celebrated in Europe, America, Canada, Australia and different parts of Africa (Regassa and Zeleke 2014).

   MTA started organising the ritual in 1998 and this brought Irreecha to the attention of the urban elites, including politicians from all corners. In the years when MTA organised the ritual, in addition to the spiritual practices, the political dimension became more pronounced. It also began to attract participants of different political persuasions, some supporting the current regime, others opposing it and demanding change. The general political atmosphere of the country was more visible at the Irreecha celebration than ever before. The question of Oromo national identity and its connection to raising pressing political issues became a prominent feature of the celebration.[14] During Irreecha celebrations, MTA preached the importance of Oromo unity in ending their oppression and marginalisation which, according to prominent Oromo politicians and activists, characterise the current state of affairs in Ethiopia. For instance, in his speech in the 2003 celebration of Irreecha, the then-chairperson of MTA, Diribi Demissie, emphasised that the Oromo need to unite against cultural denigration and political oppression. He stressed that there is a need for unity in order for the Oromo to deal with their social, economic and political predicaments.[15] This frustration with the current state of affairs and the longing for a better day was expressed also through folk songs, slogans and decorations on the occasion of the Irreecha celebration. For the state, the fact that the Irreecha celebration was used by MTA and other politicians as a platform for politically sensitising the participating public was viewed as part of the Oromo political elite's

conniving to overthrow the regime. Thus, Irreecha required quelling as it became a site for expressing dissidence and resistance. In 2004 MTA was banned from the country and also from organising the ritual.[16]

Using the vacuum created after the prohibition of MTA, the regional state officials of Oromia involved themselves in Irreecha, leading to the ritual's cooptation. In the years after 2007, the Regional State's Culture and Tourism Bureau started organising Irreecha. This marked the state appropriation of Irreecha and introduction of new political actors following the removal of others. Evidently, through this office, the state influenced the organisation and celebration of Irreecha. By controlling Irreecha, the state began to deconstruct everything that MTA hoped to achieve and presented itself as a champion of freedom and democracy for the oppressed people of Ethiopia.[17] The annual thanks-giving ritual was reclaimed and redefined as 'a ritual of peace, development, unity, tourism and Oromoness'.[18] The ritual was coopted for mobilising the Oromo in support of the state's ideology. The festivities became an opportunity to criticise opposition forces as enemies of peace, stability and development. Moreover, when election time approached, Irreecha was used as a site of campaigning for election.[19] After outlawing MTA and coopting Irreecha, another layer of management was introduced by 'formalis-ing' the ritual so as to create some 'order' in the celebration. This marked the 'cleansing' of Irreecha of potential opponents and critics by intimidating some actors or coopting others as collaborators. The first measures involved individuals who were active in the organisation of the celebration. Two prominent examples worth discussing here are Aba Melka[20] Tadesse Muleta and Aba Gada Negasa Negewo, two influential men who were active when MTA was organising the celebration. As will be discussed below, the former was excluded while the latter was coopted.

As part of restoring the 'original' Irreecha, the subcommittee for Oromo culture and history under MTA reinstated the Tadesse Muleta as the 'legitimate' Aba Melka in 2000. According to information gathered from the local community by the MTA, Tadesse Muleta was the legitimate Aba Melka who should open the Irreecha procession by performing the Melka Saquu – a process of making accessible the sacred lake that was not usable during the rainy season. He was seen as legitimate because he inherited the sacred object known as Ulfa (an object that is believed to be imbued with divine power) from his grandfather. He lived most of his life in the Amhara region, Gojjam area, until he was sponsored by MTA to return. As a result, he did not speak the Oromiffa language, but that did not negate his legitimacy in the eyes of followers. For as long as he acted as the Aba Melka, he said the opening prayers in Amharic. According to Tadesse himself, there were two reasons used to justify his removal from his role.[21] The first reason was that he did not speak the Oromiffa language and thus was not deemed Oromo enough to give the blessings at the opening of the ritual. The second reason was that he refused to host a feast for the Gada members. Based on this, his hereditary entitlement to the position of Aba Melka was revoked. Yet Tadesse saw his removal as 'political'. As far as his inability to speak the Oromo language is concerned, he recounted: 'when they asked me to come back, they well knew I was not a fluent speaker of the language and that was not a problem.'[22] With regards to the feast he was asked to host, he said 'it was not my turn to throw a feast at the time I was asked to do it.'[23] In addition, Tadesse was accused of organising the Oromo youth for a religious gathering in his compound where the Ulfa is located. The act was viewed as creating a

platform for a banned religious group whose interests were more political than religious. According to Tadesse, he had been warned and threatened by the officials many times for the alleged support he extended to secessionist groups.[24] All these justifications culminated in his being perceived as a threat which resulted in his removal from his position despite his genealogically legitimised status. To show his opposition to the act, Tadesse refused to participate in the celebration afterwards and emphatically remarked that very soon something bad would happen in retaliation for what had been done to him. He was expecting some intervention from the Ulfa which he believed to be more powerful than the people who sent him away. One cannot fail to see the connection between his displacement and his links with groups and associations that the state regarded as threatening to its authority.

While intimidating individuals and prohibiting associations was a strategy for managing religions, it was also concomitant with the process of cooptation. Restoring the Gada institution at least in the context of Irreecha celebration and promoting the Oromo national culture was one of the missions of the MTA. They worked towards the revitalisation of the Gada. Instrumental in its revival was Negessa Negewo, a very knowledgeable and committed Oromo elder who eventually became the first Aba Gada from 2001 to 2009. He was zealous in popularising Irreecha and reviving Waqqeeffana. He is credited for being a diligent person who contributed a great deal to the current popularity of Irreecha and to promoting the religion of the Oromo.[25] Though once a close ally of MTA, Negessa is now working with the ruling party. According to Diribi, the then chair of MTA, he was coopted by the culture and tourism bureau. Diribi, further asserts that Negessa was given unique privileges by the regional state including land and financial support.[26] Commenting on this, one of the board members of MTA, Adamu Beyene, said, 'What do you do when they tell you "either join us or we will kill you"? Do you choose to die or go for the first option?'[27] Obviously, Negessa chose the first option and became one of the most important figures behind the organisation of Irreecha and other cultural events under the regime. After cooptation, in his capacity as the Aba Gada, he acted as a link between the Oromo public and the state. When he was active as an Aba Gada, he acted as the master of ceremonies in charge of inviting the elderly to pray in accordance with the clan they represented. Moreover, he made speeches in which he showed his open support to the state.[28] Therefore, coopting Negessa also meant making the Gada institution a collaborator in the state's attempt to insert itself in every aspect of societal life. Thus, as shown in the above sections, cooptation has been used as a strategy of managing religions whereby the state appropriates, assimilates and instrumentalises a certain institution and/or a person to serve the interest of the rulers.

Major political actors

Most of the political aspects of the Irreecha celebration reflect the larger debate and nation-wide contestation for political power in the country. Regarding the Oromo people, it is also about who the true representative of the people is, who is genuinely dedicated to addressing key political questions and whether or not the historical demands for political space in the state apparatus have been addressed by the current arrangement. The two prominent political parties involved in shaping and reshaping

these discourses are the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO).

According to Hassen (1998), OLF was formed in 1974 by MTA members who were outraged by the banning of MTA in 1967.[29] For most of its history, OLF has been a front with a more radical political demand: the realisation of an independent state of Oromia. It waged an armed struggle until the 1991 change of regime and the coming of EPRDF. OLF joined forces with the ruling EPRDF during the transitional period. However, as disagreements and disappointments with EPRDF accumulated, OLF separated from the state once more in 1992 and continued its armed struggle (Edmund 1995). Since then it has remained an enemy of the state and in 2009 the government listed it as a terrorist group that is working to destabilise the country along with other opposition political parties and individuals.

On the other hand, OPDO was created towards the end of the civil war in 1990 by the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as part of the process of forming the multi-ethnic party (EPRDF). Founding multiple parties in which the Oromo were involved was part of the effort to secure a victory for the guerrilla groups spearheaded by the Tigrean liberation forces. OPDO is perceived by many as a surrogate of TPLF, which is the dominant group within EPRDF. Compared to OLF, it is less popular and people put less trust in it as a political body that truly represents the Oromo and articulates their political demands (Mengisteab 2007). For the most part, OPDO's very existence is believed to be in the interest of TPLF, not of the Oromo public. In contrast, OLF is regarded as a genuine front whose priority is the struggle for Oromo freedom. This could be attributed to the history of their formation. While OLF was founded by the Oromo political elites that were dedicated to the Oromo political cause, OPDO is much more recent and can be seen as a self-serving outcome of the TPLF. For many years since its formation, regardless of its claims, OPDO has failed to win the hearts of most Oromo as a party that is striving to address historical and current injustices. For some critics, OPDO is part of the Oromo problem and it is simply manipulated by TPLF to exploit Oromia (Mengisteab 2007). This is the general political development that is reflected in the celebration of Irreecha and the fellowships organised by the Waqqeffana followers. Managing Waqqeffana and Irreecha is vital to the ruling group due to the political significance they each carry.[30]

Conclusion

Religion has become one of the major variables in articulating political claims and contestations in post-1991 Ethiopia. This is especially true because of the current political atmosphere where citizens' active political participation is discouraged through repressive state measures. In the context and experience of political repression, religion is now seen as an organising force to express grievances and political discontents. The active management of religions by the Ethiopian state is, therefore, a response to the appropriation of religious spaces for political practices. As far as the regime is concerned, its continued leadership, the success of its future programmes and 'winning' the next elections depend on its relationship with the people and its grip on power. The state is attempting to gain control over almost every socio-cultural, economic and political aspect of the country. This is a means not only of establishing a convivial relation with the society but also shutting

down all possibilities for its real or imagined competitors. Given that religions have emerged in the country as formidable political stakeholders, they are forces the state must reckon with. Managing them is crucial and it is even more pressing when certain religious associations like Waqqeffana are enmeshed with ethnic identities and perceived to serve as mediums to channel political demands. The state, then, resorts to repression and cooptation to manage religions that it regards as 'dangerous'.

Repression is a mode of managing religions which entails suspending, intimidating, delegitimising and outlawing religious institutions, figures and associations in a situation where coopting them is not viable. Unlike enclavement, which requires rendering religious ideas and groups isolated or immobile, repression is an approach which does not necessarily involve taking action to block religious groups from entering a certain space. For repression to happen, the religious group, association or figure must have already been acknowledged and permitted to exist. Repression is used when the state regards the flourishing of the licenced religious group as a danger to state power. It is less a preventative intervention and more a treatment once the risk is detected. Repression involves tactics of manipulating the public image of the religion, detaining individuals and outlawing associations.

Cooptation is a systematic appropriation and control of religious institutions, prominent figures or associations. Unlike upgrading, which entails imposing change from outside, in the case of cooptation, unless it serves some political purpose, the state is less interested in reforming the religious group, association or figure. What is of value is that the said religious association or leader is appropriated to serve as a bridge that links the state to the religious group to promote the state's ideologies and disparage its opponents. Just as with repression, power is central to cooptation. It is only when the state is able to use power (in its various manifestations) that it removes its competitors and influences others to win them onto its side. One also cannot underestimate the effect of the state in luring individuals into working towards its ends, mainly by offering them privileges which they would not otherwise have.

These mechanisms can be implemented simultaneously when managing a religious institution. Within the context of the Oromo religion for instance, the state has used both cooptation and repression concomitantly. It is more productive to operationalise the two modes as a continuum in which the application of one does not necessarily imply ruling out the other, even more so because the two concepts are in continuous interaction and at times one necessitates the use of the other. The common thread that runs through both types of managing religions is that the state itself is threatened by politicised religions and is therefore forced to oversee them.

The pervasiveness of religion in many African countries like Ethiopia is not the result of recent migration. The so-called African Traditional Religions (ATRs), Christianity and Islam are century-old religious traditions that have been embedded in the socio-cultural and political fabric of the society. Whether secular or not, states will have an interest in managing religions not only for the public good but also to secure their own grip on power.[31] Therefore, there is a different or additional logic to state intervention that cannot be explained by the concepts of enclavement or upgrading alone. Managing religions is an equivocal process that involves the states' adoption of different styles of 'taming' religions for various reasons. It is also a dynamic and complex process informed by sociopolitical and historical contexts. It is dictated by state–society relations and the religious institution under consideration. Thus, when expanding the concept of

managing religions, it is more useful to analyse the wider and diverse religious and political context. By introducing the two additional concepts of cooptation and repression, this article has tried to contribute to the study of managing religions in countries that are less affected by migration.

Notes

1. The ethnographic fieldwork out of which the data for this study were generated was conducted for my doctoral studies. Researching religion and politics in the context of current Ethiopia has been a delicate terrain lately as the issue seems to have become more sensitive given how different political groups appropriate the religious space as an alternative political venue. Although one might consider being an insider as an advantage in terms of easy access to the field, it is not always the case. At times it was complicated, as for instance the issue of trust came in the way of my interaction with interlocutors. In my experience of conducting both interviews and focus group discussions, I was asked by my research participants questions like what my political persuasion was and how it could affect my interaction with them. I made sure not to disclose my political convictions in order to avoid risk for both the participants and myself. Moreover, some archival materials, especially those concerning more recent incidents were not accessible to researchers as they have been confiscated by the police. However, I had the opportunity to access the private collections of individuals who were actively involved in the Mecha Tulema Association (MTA), Waqqeeffana and Irreecha. I was also given access to the archives of the National Television Station in Addis Ababa where I was able to watch video recordings of the celebration as it took place at Hora Arsedi in the early 1990s. This helped me trace the change, continuity and evolution of Irreecha as an alternative form of political space. I have described the data-gathering processes and experiences and reflected on my 'insider' position in detail in an article titled 'Ambiguities of "Insiderness" in the study of Religions: Reflecting on Experiences from Ethiopia' (see Debele 2016).
2. The concept of deprivatisation presupposes the relegation of religion to the private domain, as stipulated by the secularisation thesis, but argues that it is now returning to the public sphere. However, this is open to challenge if situated in the context of the debates about whether religion has really ever been a private matter.
3. To talk about the public sphere as a purely secular arena does not always take into account contexts where drawing a line between the religious and the political as well as the secular is not tenable (see also Asad 2005). Moreover, even when discussing the emergence of religion in the public sphere, the proposition to make religion befitting to a public sphere, as stipulated by both Habermas and Casanova, is problematic because it imposes rational standards which are informed by secularist assumptions and logics.
4. Turner's discussion on managing religion appears to be largely normative and prescriptive.
5. Interview with Adamu Beyene. Addis Ababa. 22 November 2013. Waqqeffana literally means 'to worship *Waaqa*', which was borrowed from Oromo evangelicals who use it to describe the whole church service.
6. Irreecha can take place in individual households at any time of the year should there be any request made by the family to *Waaqa*.
7. Interview with Kuma Ide'e. Dukem. 16 February 2013. In addition to its politicisation, Irreecha is also contested due to divergent views regarding spirit possession sessions and associated rituals that take place to invoke the spirits which are believed to reside inside the sacred lake and the tree. Some argue that it is a recent addition to the otherwise 'pure and authentic' Oromo ceremony of worship while others assert that it is an integral part of the thanksgiving ritual. For more on this, see Debele (2015).
8. For more on this, see Debele (2015).

9. Scholarship on Oromo studies that advocates the colonisation thesis, such as the work of Asefa Jaleta (2005), emphasises that the Oromo were converted to Orthodox Christianity forcefully. They were also made to assimilate to the cultural traditions of the northern highlanders. During these processes, they abandoned their religion. Their incorporation into the hegemonic Abyssinian empire also led to the weakening of the Gada, the age grade system which is described as a democratic administrative unit through which the Oromo used to govern themselves. There is enough evidence to support this narrative. However, this highly politicised stipulation overlooks the complexity of the Oromo religious encounters. It also does not allow any space for the possibility of internal change that would have led to the declining significance of the Gada administration and the religious institution. For instance, Hassen (1994) aptly describes the formation of the Gibe states and how not only the Gada but also the religious tradition lost relevance gradually in response to such internal dynamics as well as exposure to Islam. Moreover, in other parts of the country, the Oromo have sought Islam and evangelical Christianity as alternatives to Orthodox Christianity in which case they played active roles in resisting imposed religions or choosing from the host of alternatives available at the time. These are only a few examples showing that the Oromo were not always passive recipients of imposition, thereby refuting the narrative of victimisation.
10. Quite a number of people I interviewed stated their passionate support to OLF back then, but their anger and frustration at the way things are now. Some were explicit in their opposition and this is astonishing because it comes at a time when everyone seems to be spying on one another and trust is eroding. As a result, people have become less explicit in stating their political opinions. On a number of occasions, my interlocutors said to me, although jokingly, that I could be spying on them but they also stated that they did not care even if I was spying because they were no longer fearful.
11. I was told by Diribi that there was a cell of Waqqeffata members who used to gather in Addis at the MTA office once in a while. It also had an office in Addis Ababa and Bishoftu.
12. Interview with Gemechu Olana, coordinator of the movement, 15 March 2013.
13. Interview with Diribi Demissie. Addis Ababa. 15 October 2013.
14. As I have shown in my doctoral research, the appropriation of Irreecha was an alternative public sphere that served as a rallying point for the opposition. See also Debele (2015).
15. 2003 celebration of Irreecha. Video accessed from the private collections of Diribi Demissie.
16. MTA's suspension was the result of its active involvement in promoting the Oromo national identity and propagating an age-old and yet unresolved political question, which made the association the mouthpiece of the Oromo ethnic group. In 2004 MTA organised a demonstration in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, to oppose the transfer of the capital city of Oromia regional state from Addis Ababa to Adama. This eventually led to the banning and confiscation of its properties. Eventually, like the Waqqeeffana Followers Association, MTA was also banned and this brought an end to its involvement in Irreecha celebrations.
17. Interview with Mamo Gada. Bishoftu. 24 March 2013.
18. Interview with Caalaa Sori. Bishoftu. 23 March 2013.
19. See (Debele 2015).
20. Aba Melka is a religiously sanctioned role that is given to a man who belongs to the clan that resides in the vicinity where a sacred lake is located. The main task of the Aba Melka is to open prayers when thanksgiving rituals like Irreecha are to be performed. Aba means father and Melka means lake. Thus, Aba Melka literally translates as 'father of the lake'.
21. Interview with Tadesse Muleta. Bishoftu. 20 November 2013.
22. Interview with Tadesse Muleta. Bishoftu. 20 November 2013.
23. Interview with Tadesse Muleta. Bishoftu. 20 November 2013.
24. Interview with Tadesse Muleta. Bishoftu. 20 November 2013.
25. Interview with Negasa Negewo. Bishoftu. 25 November 2012.
26. Interview with Diribi Demissie. Addis Ababa. 15 October 2013.
27. Interview with Adamu Beyene. Addis Ababa. 22 November 2013.

28. Speech made by Negessa Negewo during the celebration of Irreecha in 2007 from videos obtained from the regional state's culture and tourism bureau. Negewo continues to be a controversial person to date. In the October 2016 celebration of Irreecha which turned out to be an incident in which hundreds died, the youth shouted in protest when he took the microphone to officiate the ceremony due to the belief that he has been co-opted by the state and never stands for the interest of the Oromo people who were protesting to end their marginalisation.

29. As described above, the Waqqeffana Followers Association and its link with MTA disturbed the ruling party not only because of MTA's political convictions but also because of the Association's historical links with the opposition political front which is regarded as a major threat to the current regime.

30. Since the introduction of the Addis Ababa Master plan in 2014 and the ensuing Oromo Protest, OPDO has slightly shifted from its usual submissiveness to becoming more assertive. The Addis Ababa Master Plan was a plan that was meant to expand the capital city by expropriating land from the surrounding Oromo farmers. The proposal faced strong opposition as it involved land-grabbing. OPDO opposed it because it compromised the autonomy of the Oromia regional state and also on grounds that its implementation meant taking away land from the Oromo people. Looking at such recent developments, some argue that OPDO has to be given the chance to prove itself if it truly stands for the interest of the Oromo people.

31. There is ample literature on the role of religion in politics in Africa. See for example Ukah (2006), Birgit Meyer (2004) and Hacket (1991).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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