Conversion and Proselytisation in Southern Ethiopia. A Historical and Comparative Perspective

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Ethiopia is a very exciting and fruitful setting for the study of conversion and proselytisation. The three major religious traditions are represented and have had many instances of conversions from one tradition to the other: Traditional African religion, Islam and Christianity – the last with many different branches. We also have the possibilities of studying the phenomenon over a longer time-span than in any other part of sub-Saharan Africa. This gives us excellent opportunities for a historical and comparative study of conversion and proselytisation. For the purpose of this study I define conversion as a change of affiliation from one of the three religious traditions, traditional African religion, Islam and Christianity, to another[1] – regardless of the degree of change in conviction the change of affiliation involves. And proselytisation is then a shift from one branch of Christianity to another, notably from Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity (EOC) to either Catholic or Protestant Christianity.[2]

At the 13th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in 1997, I delivered a paper on religious dynamics in Southern Ethiopia, which was a presentation of preliminary results from a forthcoming doctoral dissertation, *Continuity and Change. The Rise and Development of Protestant Christianity in Kambaataa-Hadiyya, Ethiopia, 1928 to 1974*.[3] In the present paper I will bring up more material from the now completed dissertation when I deal with conversion and religious change in Southern Ethiopia during the 20th Century, especially the development in the Kambaataa-Hadiyya area. At the same time I will carry the discussion about conversion in Ethiopia further on, taking into consideration scholarly contributions in recent years, and at the same time exploring the possibilities of gaining new insights from a comparative study of conversion and proselytisation. We will especially consider the insights that can be gained from a

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[1] In other studies it is relevant to use different definitions of conversion, cf. RØNNE 1997.

[2] The definition used for the purpose of this study differs from a common definition of 'proselytisation' as "sheep stealing" and the corruption of witness and conversion, "when cajolery, bribery, undue pressure or intimidation is used." LAUNHARDT 2005: 196f.

[3] Due to a very tight time schedule I had to write and publish the dissertation in Danish (Kontinuitet og forandring. Opkomsten og udviklingen af protestantisk kristendom i Kambaataa-Hadiyya, Etiopien, 1928 til 1974, København, Akademisk Forlag, 2002), but I hope in the near future to raise funds for a translation and publishing of the dissertation in English.

comparison with conversions from traditional religions to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity when Christianity was first introduced to Northern Ethiopia and later expanded to the Southern part of present day Ethiopia. As space is limited we will have to save a comparison with conversions to Islam in different parts of Ethiopia, both earlier and in the 20th century, to another occasion.

Of recent studies dealing with conversion in an Ethiopian context I will especially pay attention to the works of Abbebe Kifleyesus, Alexander Naty, Susanne Epple, Christiane Falge, John H. Hamer, O.M. Eide, Arne Tolo, Tibebe Eshete and Steven Kaplan.[4] The last has, in addition to his work on King Ezana's conversion in the fourth century (KAPLAN 1982) and the conversions to Christianity in the early Solomonic Ethiopia, i.e. c 1270-1468 (KAPLAN 1984), started to synthesize the existing studies and summarize their findings in order to introduce a more comparative and thematic approach when dealing with conversion and religious change in Ethiopia. It is my hope that this paper will contribute to the comparative discussions Kaplan has launched.

Horton's theory and conversions in Ethiopia

In addition to that, and in order to give the discussion about conversion in Ethiopia a broader African perspective, we will on relevant points refer to the extensive debate on conversion and religious change in Africa that was in a special way stimulated through a theory developed by Robin Horton (1971 and 1975). The latter, in his so-called intellectualist explanation of conversion, argues that what happened when Africans turned from traditional religion to Christianity (or Islam) should be seen primarily as a development of traditional religion in response to the enlargement of scale, to the transformation of the narrow, local viewpoints of the so-called 'small-scale' societies by the wider horizons brought to Africa by the introduction of the modern world, not least through the development of commerce, nation states and communications. When people were seeing the boundary of the microcosm weakening or dissolving, the logical response was to reduce the importance of the lesser spirits, underpinners of the microcosm, and to develop the concept of the High God to meet the challenges of the macrocosm where they consider the High God ruling.

In my contribution to the 13th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in 1997, I established as a frame of reference the theory developed by Robin Horton and the extensive debate it triggered. However, after a study of the religious changes in Southern Ethiopia I concluded that, considering the very comprehensive and diverse picture we have got of conversions to Christianity in Kambaataa-Hadiyya, Horton's theory seems not capable of explaining the complex phenomenon. In particular two aspects of Horton's theory make it less useful in explaining the processes of religious changes in Southern Ethiopia. Firstly, the theory is determined by a rationalistic understanding of religion, meaning that it is quite unsuited and unable to contain the

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[4] See the bibliography.

religious dynamism of the South Ethiopian setting and to include the religious factors which apparently were of decisive importance in many conversions to Christianity in Southern Ethiopia.[5] Secondly, the theory does not consider the specific conditions in Ethiopia, as Horton did not use any Ethiopian material at all when he developed it. This means that Horton's model has been unable to include some of the factors which have had the greatest influence also on the religious development in Southern Ethiopia, more specifically those related to the presence of an African colonial power and an African national church in close connection thereto. We will also in the present paper consider several cases that support these points. However, this doesn't mean that Horton's theory is of no use when studying conversions in an Ethiopian setting. It is possible to use it in a more heuristic way in that we employ elements from the theory to raise questions and discover aspects and patterns. And as Horton's theory is developed on the basis of social, economic, cultural and religious circumstances in other parts of Africa, especially in West Africa, we can use his theory to give the discussion an all-African perspective and make a comparison with conversions and religious change in other parts of Africa.

It could be argued that it is not scholarly consistent to apply Horton's theory to conversions and religious changes in the 4th and in the 13th to 15th centuries Ethiopia as the theory is specifically related to the social development in Africa in modern time. However, I think that for example Kaplan is on firm scholarly ground when he uses Horton's theory both in dealing with Ezana's conversion in the 4th century and in his treatment of the religious development in the so-called Early Solomonic Ethiopia. For the decisive elements in Horton's theory, the widening of horizons and the development from a small-scale society with a so-called enlargement of scale, was not confined to modern Africa. It also happened for certain groups – in a way or another – at different points in the course of history. The same could be said about the basic cosmology Horton relates to – with both a number of so-called lesser spirits and a supreme being. Particularly relevant for an Ethiopian setting is Donald N. Levine's presentation of the social development in Ethiopia (LEVINE 1974: 25ff). When it comes to the South Ethiopian people, he talks about a great number of diverse, historically autonomous societies of small scale which were original units in the complex socio-cultural system Ethiopia has formed. And it seems clear from his description that not only in modern time but also through many centuries earlier we have had a tension between the microcosm of the local small-scale societies on the one hand and the macrocosm of the large-scale society in 'Greater Ethiopia' on the other. For many people life was almost entirely confined to the local small-scale society. But simultaneously several factors contributed to an enlargement of scale for other groups, not least the conquest and the subsequent incorporation of the South Ethiopian peoples into the sphere of influence of a Central or North Ethiopian State.

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[5]   This is a weakness of Horton's theory that for instance Richard Gray has called attention to in the debate following the launching of Horton's theory, cf. GRAY 1990.

Ezana's conversion reconsidered

The heading is the title of an article where Steven Kaplan examines the conversion to Christianity of this fourth century Ethiopian ruler (KAPLAN 1982) and first of all focuses on the question: What were the motives behind King Ezana's adoption of Christianity?

Ezana's conversion is clearly witnessed in a series of three inscriptions executed after important military victories. In the earliest inscription Ezana dedicates his victories to several of the gods worshipped in the Aksumite pantheon, among them the God of Heaven, Astar, who could be regarded as the 'High God' or the 'Supreme Being' of the old Aksumite religion. The next inscription, written in the local language Ge'ez, omits any reference to most of the deities in the Aksumite religion but attributes the victory exclusively to "the might of the Lord of Heaven, who has created me, of the Lord of all by whom the King is beloved." And the third inscription, which is in Greek, begins: "In the faith of God and the Power of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost who have saved my kingdom. I believe in your son Jesus Christ who has saved me."

The third inscription undoubtedly shows that political considerations must have influenced Ezana's attitude toward Christianity. The text expresses a clear Christian confession and is at the same time written in Greek and thus clearly composed with a foreign audience in mind. This fits in with the common political explanation of Ezana's conversion that he converted in order to win the favour of the pro-Christian Roman emperor Constantine. However, as Kaplan states, to concede this "is not the same as to agree that the primary motivation behind the king's conversion was political." The whole series of inscriptional evidence cannot be sufficiently explained only through reference to political factors. To begin with, a purely political explanation does not give a satisfactory answer to the questions raised by the second inscription. Contrary to the Graeco-Roman world where Christianity began among the lower classes and only gradually spread upward until finally also gaining converts among members of the royal family, at the time of Ezana's conversion the majority of his subjects were still faithful to their traditional religion. How could we then explain that Ezana writes an inscription in Ge'ez, which although a bit ambiguous also reflects a considerable change in his religious world-view? Written in Ge'ez the inscription was unintelligible to those, he allegedly wanted to impress whereas at the same time he ran the risk of offending and losing support from his Ge'ez speaking, and still non-Christian, subjects. The only plausible explanation is that the inscription reflects a genuine religious conversion. But what has caused this important religious change if it is not only a result of expedient political manoeuvring?

In order to explain this change Kaplan employs Horton's theory on conversion and religious change in Africa. That is, in fact, remarkable since Kaplan wants to use the theory in order to get "a religious understanding of Ezana's conversion" whereas Horton both in his theory itself and in the debate following the launching of the theory has stressed the socio-economic rather than the religious factors in the conversion process. Therefore, it is worth noticing how Kaplan uses Horton's theory. In doing so we will see how we in a scholarly work can benefit from a model like Horton's, even if it is not

used as an overall model of explanation. At the same time we will have exhibited some of the model's weaknesses.

It is obvious that Horton's theory suggests a focusing on the development in Ezana's religious view. And Kaplan clearly demonstrates how that development can be explained by Horton's theory: Several factors have contributed to an enlargement of scale in the case of Ezana, which has caused a gradual change in his cosmology with a still more elaborated concept of the High God, Astar. And this eventually paved the way for his acceptance of a monotheistic religion, Christianity. I will comment on two aspects of Kaplan's application of Horton's theory:

First, there is obviously a *possible* connection between Ezana's greater involvement with the macrocosm and the elaboration of his concept of the Supreme Being, as Kaplan suggests in accordance with Horton's theory. But is it possible to point to circumstances around the described development in Ezana's cosmology, which can only be explained by a causal connection to the enlargement of scale? Could not the elaborated concept of the High God as part of a conversion process just as well be explained by the Christian influence Ezana has been exposed to through Christian traders, advisers etc. who were in growing number present in Aksum?[6] Secondly, I think that Kaplan uses the model slightly differently than Horton himself. For Horton the conversion consists by and large in the cosmological change itself and Christianity thus only functions as a catalyst of a process already on the way as a result of a socio-cultural development. Whereas Kaplan considers the change in cosmology as something that eventually results in a genuine conversion to Christianity – thus attaching greater importance to Christianity itself and leaving more room for the religious dynamic.

Finally, I think that one more question needs to be addressed in relation to the three inscriptions. Given that the second inscription just as the third reflects Ezana's conversion to Christianity, how could we then explain the fact that the second inscription, contrary to the third, does not use an explicit Christian terminology, but the more vague or ambiguous phrase 'the Lord of Heaven'? We can explain it by making the supposition that Ezana, while still expressing his new religious orientation, at the same time tried to describe it in terms understandable within the frame of traditional cosmology. This endeavour of Ezana is worth keeping in mind when we turn to the conversions which took place when Christianity later expanded to the southern part of present day Ethiopia, especially in the period from 1300 to 1600.

Conversions in the 14th to 16th centuries in Southern Ethiopia

Taddesse Tamrat describes the religious landscape where Christianity was introduced primarily by monks who followed in the footstep of the North Ethiopian conquerors, as follows:

> "The general features of Kushitic pagan worship seem to be based on a sky god,
> with numerous good and bad spirits inhabiting the mountains, trees, rivers, and

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[6] TIBEBE ESHETE (2009:16) seems to support this view.

lakes. Prayers and sacrifices were offered to these spirits, through hereditary priestly families which seem to have shared much of the sanctity of the gods of which they were the intermediaries, and, as such, they seem to have wielded much power over their peoples... The smallest details of the daily life of the people were presumed to be under the control of these spirits" (TADESSE TAMRAT 1972: 234).

When we relate this description to Levine's presentation of the social development in Ethiopia mentioned above, it seems relevant, as Kaplan does (1984: 124), to use Horton's theory also in the study of conversions to Christianity in Southern Ethiopia during this period.

It looks as if the common people in Southern Ethiopia were attracted to Christianity and welcomed the monks because they experienced repression and exploitation by the local religious leaders. And the monks shared the view of the local people with regard to the reality and power of the spirits whom the local religious leaders represented and at the same time the monks appeared to represent an even stronger religious power. In view of Horton's theory nothing indicates an enlargement of scale in the case of the common people. Neither was their attraction to Christianity connected to a development in their cosmology. On the contrary, deeply immersed in the local small-scale society and within the frame of traditional cosmology, they joined the religious experts with most religious power (KAPLAN 2004: 384).

Similarly many of the local political rulers also accepted the introduction of Christianity and supported the monks. There were probable two reasons for this acceptance and support: Firstly, in some places a power struggle was going on between the local political rulers and the religious leaders which gave rise to a kind of unholy alliance between the monks and the local rulers in order to overcome their common rival. Secondly, through their links with neighbouring rulers and the incorporation into the North Ethiopian state, the local rulers increased their involvement in the world outside their local microcosm. "In response, [they] may have begun to seek a religion which showed a greater concern with events in the wider world and yet did not require them to abandon their belief in forces which affected their local society", Kaplan concludes (1984: 124). And Ethiopian Christianity as presented by the monks was just such a religion, being on the one hand a universal religion and on the other having a clear relevance to the concerns and problems of daily life in the local society. Apparently Kaplan again considers this to be an affirmation of Horton's theory. However, as argued in connection with Kaplan's discussion of Ezana's conversion, Kaplan has an approach different from Horton's. Kaplan regards conversion to Christianity not only as a development of the cosmology in reaction to socio-cultural changes, but attaches much more importance to the role Christianity itself has in the conversion process. This role Christianity acquired as a religion which covered both microcosm and macrocosm and thus for the political rulers being a religion more suited for their situation.

When he discusses the question to what extent conversion to Christianity caused the South Ethiopian people to change their religious beliefs and practices, Taddesse Tamrat refers to a subject that is of relevance for a comparison with conversions to Christianity in the 20th century Southern Ethiopia, namely the conception of evil and

how it is handled (TADESSE TAMRAT 1972: 234f). All sorts of evils were ascribed to the activities of spirits. And people sought to placate the evil forces through the agency of their religious leaders. The turning to Christianity then happened only because they here found an even stronger power to combat the evil spirits. However, the basic cosmology remained unchanged. As discussed above, from the beginning Ezana likewise endeavoured to communicate his new belief to his subjects within the frame of traditional cosmology.

Conversion and proselytisation in Southern Ethiopia during the 20ᵗʰ Century

In the study of conversion and protelytisation in Southern Ethiopia we will especially focus on the Kambaataa-Hadiyya area, where I carried out field research during several periods from 1992 to 1994. We will look at the most important reasons for conversions and proselytisation to Protestant Christianity from traditional religion, Islam and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

At the same time it is interesting to compare the situation in Kambaataa-Hadiyya with Hamer's study of conversions to Protestant Christianity in Sidamo (HAMER 2002), since Sidamo and Kambaataa and Hadiyya are closely related, ethnically, culturally and linguistically. The most striking difference is about the receptiveness in relation to Protestant Christianity. While the Protestant Churches in Kambaataa-Hadiyya experienced a large growth, according to Hamer the vast majority of people in Sidamo were unresponsive to Christianity. Further studies need to be done in order to affirm and explain this difference. In a short paper like this we can only give small hints at possible reasons.

Conversion and the spirits

The most frequent reason for conversions to Protestant Christianity seems to have been the opportunity to be liberated from the repression and exploitation by the leaders of the possession cult. In the years following the Amharic conquest, spirit possession cults seem to have sprung up all over Kambaataa-Hadiyya, probably in response to the social stress and lack of cultural orientation that was a consequence of the Amharic conquest (BRAUKÄMPER 1983: 304). Supposedly they also filled a leadership vacuum that came, not least at the local level, as a result of the replacement of the old traditional ruling system with the new Amharic. Particularly important as a background for the conversions to Protestant Christianity is the fact that this spirit possession cult, as experienced by common people, developed into a repressive and exploitive institution. The result was that people were attracted to Protestant Christianity. First, they received help to interpret the repression they felt, because it was identified with Satan and his demonic spirits. Secondly, they got a tool for overcoming the evil, as Christ through the narratives of the New Testament was presented as the one who had power over Satan and the evil spirits.[7] Based on that, people dared to oppose the possession cult and to

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[7] Cf. also TIBEBE ESHETE 2009: 89f.

refuse to obey the demands of the so-called Jaaraa men (Jaaraa was the spirit in the possession cult). Finally, this process was reinforced by a conversion formula widely used by the Protestant churches both in Kambaataa-Hadiyya and in other parts of Southern Ethiopia. The new converts were instructed to raise their left hand and deny Satan and his works, and then raise their right hand expressing their belief in Jesus Christ.

Among the converts we also find some of the former leaders in the possession cult, the Jaaraa men. According to Horton, these religious experts could be expected sometimes even to take the lead in turning to the new belief because they, just as experts, were among the first to be aware of the inadequacy of the old cosmology when confronted with drastic social and cultural changes (HORTON 1971: 103). But is that what we see in Kambaataa-Hadiyya in case of the Jaaraa men? First, they were not taking the lead in turning to Protestant Christianity. Rather they were reluctantly following their former followers. Secondly, they were not doing so because they realized the "interpretative challenges" to the old cosmology. We will let one of them tell his story:

> "I was a man of Jaaraa in my family, and people used to give me some offerings. Meanwhile, some of my family members became believers. So I was expecting that my Jaaraa would punish them for deserting it, but I noticed that it couldn't punish. Finally through my observation I realized that the power of Jaaraa is less than the power of God. Then I stayed for some time thinking on this issue and eventually I became a Christian."[8]

From his own emic perspective, it is a question of power and control, of who is the strongest. He experiences that his followers are turning to another religious authority and he can't prevent it by the means he is used to employing. Therefore, he concludes that the new religious authority is stronger than his. He interprets it as if God, as He is preached in Protestant Christianity, is stronger than the power he himself possesses. So he surrenders – reluctantly. However, could these circumstances be described also with an etic model like Horton´s? I don't think so. The Jaaraa man doesn't seem to be aware of any challenge from a modern situation, deeply immersed as he is in the local small-scale society. Here he meets representatives from another religion, and then he is, on a very concrete level, challenged by them with the question of religious power (KAPLAN 2004: 384). So, when we thus relate this type of conversion to Horton's theory it is evidently not the socio-economic but the religious factors that are decisive.

When we relate to conversions in Sidamo, the most frequently mentioned reason for accepting Christianity was also "disillusionment with possession spirits" and "the superior power of the Christian deity over possession spirits." (HAMER 2002: 607) However, there seems to be the difference, that in Sidamo – according to Hamer – the spirits were not generally considered repressing, exploiting or, in an absolute sense, evil. Therefore people tended to turn to Protestant Christianity only if they found the Christian god *better* at fulfilling their needs and the old spirits *less* satisfying in this respect. This may partly explain the difference between the growth of the Protestant church in Sidamo and in Kambaataa-Hadiyya. However, it should be noted, that Tolo,

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[8]   Interview with Milkeebo Otochcho, Olloolichcho, 1993.07.06.

in a study preceding that of Hamer, has a completely different point of view concerning the success of Protestant Christianity in Sidamo. He describes how "the awakening movement took off and spread like wildfire all over Sidama" (TOLO 1998: 246). And he states that one of the main reasons was just a feeling of being dominated and exploited by Satan represented by the leaders of the possession cult (TOLO 1998: 255). It is outside the scope of this paper to deal in depth with this important difference between the results of Tolo and Hamer.

If we compare this kind of conversion to Protestant Christianity with conversions to Orthodox Christianity for similar reasons centuries earlier, we do have examples of Protestant Christians, who in same way as the converts earlier have retained the traditional cosmology when it comes to the conception of spirits. However, in general the Protestant converts, to a larger extent than the earlier ones, have obtained what Gray in the debate on conversion and religious change in Africa calls "a theocratic reorganization of the cosmos." (GRAY 1990: 111) In particular through the Protestant preaching and teaching the evil coming from the spirits was interpreted in relation to the dichotomy between God and his adversary Satan. And the remedy was not just a stronger power from other religious experts, but the power of God himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

Conversions and the Amhara authorities

> "On the one hand Jaaraa was threatening us, on other hand authorities were threatening us. When we were converted, the situation was so dark that there were no human sights and no alternatives"[9].

When a good deal of the elderly people in Kambaataa-Hadiyya explain why they turned to Protestant Christianity, in addition to the possession cult they point to the repression and exploitation from the Amhara authorities.[10] This is not just a post-rationalization owing to more recent attitudes and sentiments. First, it is confirmed by contemporary written sources, including reports from foreign observers (RØNNE 2002). Secondly, if a Protestant Christian's memory in this respect was distorted by his present view he would rather point to a religious factor than to a socio-economic one. And thirdly, the influences people in the meantime have got through the Protestant churches tend to give them a more positive attitude to the Amhara state and culture (RØNNE 1997).

Some of those who give the repression and exploitation from the Amhara authorities as their reason for turning to Protestant Christianity were formal members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as they were baptized into the EOC during the massive campaigns just after World War II. So formally speaking we are dealing with proselytisation according to our definition. However, from the point of view of the

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[9]   Interview with Caffaamo Adago, Hommeechcho, 1993.06.26.

[10] In his recent study of Protestant Christianity in Western Ethiopia, Øyvind EIDE, too, points to this conflict in relation to the Amharic rulers as an important factor in both the rise of Protestant Christianity and in the life of the church. Cf. also NATY 2005: 148, 150.

South Ethiopian converts they do not consider it a shift from one Christian tradition to another – with all the problems involved in the relation between the EOC and the Protestant churches. The converts themselves experienced the shift as a conversion from traditional religion to Christianity as their religious beliefs and practices were totally within the frame of traditional religion – in spite of their formal membership of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. And besides, many of them had a feeling of being forced into the EOC by the mass-baptisms carried out during the campaigns[11]. This shows the difficulties in dealing with proselytisation from the EOC to Protestant Christianity in a South Ethiopian context.

Proselytisation and literacy

Closely connected to the role of the Amhara authorities is another important factor in the rise and growth of Protestant Christianity in Kambaataa-Hadiyya, the introduction of literacy by the Protestant missions and churches[12]. One of the converts expounds the connection this way:

> "You know we were their tenants. We were paying taxes to them (Amhara people). We were ignorant and they were learned. Maybe they were threatened that once we become literate we will rebel against them. They know that Christianity will introduce many things to the people. It is true that Christianity introduces wisdom and knowledge. It is better than everything in the world. Amhara know that. That was why they persecuted Christians"[13].

The Amharas, especially the Orthodox clergy, were regarded as literate people, and that was part of the superiority they were ascribed. At the same time, literacy was an aspect of and a symbol of the modern world that the local people had scented after the Amharic conquest and the incorporation of Kambaataa-Hadiyya into the Ethiopian state. Then, there was a feeling that the Amharic rulers, as part of their suppression, were preventing the local people from having a share in literacy and other modern goods. In that situation the offer from the Protestant missions and churches of literacy teaching had an enormous impact. By the offer of literacy, people were drawn into the Protestant church and got a share of something they felt they were withheld by their oppressors. It was probably experienced as liberation and a lifting up from an inferior position. People were given a new sense of self-esteem and pride[14]. And it became an opening to the modern world – with far reaching consequences.

Similarly, Hamer mentions the possibility of gaining power and status through formal education as one of the major reasons people in Sidamo had for turning to Protestant Christianity. He links it to what he calls "the secret of the book," i.e. the Bible, a secret the Ethiopian Orthodox priests were considered unwilling to reveal (HAMER 2002: 608). When now the Protestant missionaries were eager to teach people

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[11] Cf. also NATY 2005: 150f.
[12] Cf. also KAPLAN 2004: 383; KAPLAN 2005: 100f.; FALGE 2005: 178.
[13] Interview with Jifaaro Abbiyyo, Boosho'anna, 1993.06.25.
[14] Cf. also FALGE 2005: 179.

to read 'the Book', the elder generation in Sidamo took it as a sign that "their children would gain power from the secrets that had been kept from them in the colonial past" (HAMER 2002: 609).

Also from some of the groups, who had more lately emigrated from Northern Ethiopia and were conscious members of EOC, people turned to Protestant Christianity because of the offer of literacy teaching. However, for them the shift was not connected to a feeling of suppression from the Amhara authorities. On the other hand, we here have a clear instance of proselytisation that is not without problems for the EOC – to put it mildly – because the Protestant churches were in a position to offer modern education primarily because of resources from Western missions to which the EOC did not have access. This was one of many causes of severe tensions between Protestant Christians, both nationals and expatriates, on the one hand and representatives of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church on the other – these tensions being an important issue in discussions about proselytisation.

Conclusion

Ethiopia is a fruitful setting for a historical and comparative study of conversion and proselytisation and this paper has highlighted some of the insights that can be gained from this approach. On the one hand the paper confirms the conclusion of the paper I presented at the 13th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in 1997 that conversion is a multi-causal phenomenon and that, as a socio-religious phenomenon, conversion has both social and religious causes. On the other the historical and comparative study presented in this paper has shown the importance of religious factors in many conversions to Christianity in Ethiopia and also pointed to the important part Christianity itself often played in the process. And this has thrown new light on the religious dynamics in the Ethiopian setting.

Moreover, the benefits we can have from a comparative study of conversions in Ethiopia are far from exhausted. I have already mentioned comparison with conversions to Islam in different parts of Ethiopia as a subject that should be further explored. Other themes in relation to conversion where a comparative study can give new insights are for example 'patterns for the spreading of Christianity' and 'conversion as the assumption of new identities'. I plan to return to some of these themes on another occasion. And it is my hope that I have stimulated others to explore how fruitful a comparative study of conversion can be.

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