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Religion and Violence in the Horn of Africa: Trajectories of Mimetic Rivalry and Escalation between ‘Political Islam’ and the State

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ABSTRACT

Religiously inspired violence is a global phenomenon and connects to transnational narratives, necessitating comparative analysis of socio-historical context and patterns of ideological mobilization. Northeast Africa hosts several radical-extremist and terrorist groups, mostly of Muslim persuasion, tuned in to these global narratives while connecting to local interests. Christian radicalism and violence also occur but are less ideologically consistent and less widespread. I examine key aspects of the current role and ideological self-positioning of Islamist radicalism in state contexts, comparing Somalia, affected by Islamist violence since the late 1990s, and Ethiopia, where Islam’s mobilization followed a different path and where the state so far contained politicization and open radicalism of Muslim groups. A brief contrastive case from Nigeria is also provided. It is observed that Islam, while of course not ‘equaling’ violence, easily provides a militant political theology, frequently instrumentalized in conflicts and situations of (perceived) grievance, and via mimetic rivalry then becomes radically ideological. Securitized response patterns of state authorities toward militancy play a role in furthering violent radicalization. I follow a sociological-anthropological approach but also refer to key aspects of national-legal frameworks regarding state and religion, next to societal and political bases of Muslim militant mobilization for collective aims and self-presentation.

Introduction

Phenomena of religiously inspired violence and extremism¹ across the world have evoked an enormous wave of media attention and academic studies in recent decades. While these studies yielded major insights into the societal-historical and socio-

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¹‘Religious violence’ is a problematic term, although I do not agree with William T. Cavanaugh, ‘The Myth of Religious Violence’ in Joel Hodge, et al. (eds) *Does Religion Cause Violence? Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Violence and Religion in the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), pp. 7–24. The term ‘extremism’ is often used in describing radical religious groups and can be held to define a mode of uncompromising, supremacist thinking (and sometimes violent practice) refusing dialogue or exchange and which holds no bars on advancing the adherents’ own views, seeing the end as justifying all means. Cf. A.P. Schmid, ‘Introduction’ in A.P. Schmid (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, pp. 25–26.

psychological factors that generate it, good predictive or explanatory models on the emergence and decline of religiously phrased extremism and violence remain a challenge, especially on a country basis. In general, analysts point to contexts of accelerated globalization, persistent inequality, closed peer group socialization, and growing tensions between faith or ethno-regional communities. These often overlap and are fueled by foreign religious influence, money flows and ideological currents as well as migratory activists joining armed struggles abroad. But the presence of these factors in itself does not make for sufficient explanation, let alone for developing strategies to defuse or prevent religiously motivated violence.

Since about two decades, this kind of violence is also rapidly expanding in Africa,² although it is not clear whether there are specific ‘African traits’ in this violence. This paper addresses some recent processes of religious radicalization, extremism and violence in Africa, with a special focus on Islam, taking Somalia and Ethiopia as case studies, with comparative notes on Nigeria, and contends that the equilibrium of state law (enforcement) and contentious ideological struggle is crucial. The constitutional-legal framework of religion and state-religion relations will therefore be discussed. To catch the dynamics of armed struggle vs. accommodation, one must also look for contributing societal conditions of (perceived) marginalization, poverty, inequality, etc., as ‘drivers’ for recruitment of perpetrators; they often fuel the discursive formation of religious extremism, getting ‘translated’ into violent political activity. But once triggered in contexts of problematic societal conditions, this violent activity requires analysis of its religiously framed ideological mechanisms.

The Horn of Africa provides a useful contrasting case to West Africa, on which most discussions of religious-political activism and terror movements have centered. The regions differ in religious composition and historical traditions of both Islam and Christianity but have both an indigenous dynamic that merits some comparison, notably the light of accelerating global influences of recent decades. This juxtaposition (partly retained here in the brief comparison below with the situation in Jos, Nigeria) extends the domain of study on possible underlying reasons for ‘radicalization’ and the recourse to religiously-styled violence. Globalization in the last thirty years has no doubt meant ‘contagion’: intensified contexts of interaction and ‘mirroring’ behavior and bringing together previously distinct entities—from countries to classes to youth to social and religious movements—in interactive spaces, where rivalry based on perceived and real differences or ‘grievances’ emerge and are acted out in imitative fashion.³ While globalized spaces led to a gradual decline of differences, via the spread of education, use of technology, economic links, and more wealth, at the same time new rivalries emerge and are inadvertently also used to (re)assert *identity* difference.⁴ Much of this re-assertion occurs via public activism and violent acts couched in religious terms. Terrorism experts tell us how ‘modern’ the religion-inspired extremists of today often are: well-educated, technologically savvy, not poor and downtrodden, and with a knowledge of ‘Western’ culture and institutions.

²See Hans Krech, ‘The Growing Influence of Al-Qaeda on the African Continent’, *Africa Spectrum*, 46:1 (2011), pp. 125–137; Abdisaid M. Ali-Koor, *Islamist Extremism in East Africa* (Washington, DC: African Center for Strategic Studies briefing, 2016).

³Cp. also: Paul Dumouchel, ‘Inside Out. Political Violence in the Age of Globalization’, *Contagion. Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture*, 15–16 (2008–2009), pp. 173–184.

⁴Cp. René Girard, ‘On War and Apocalypse’, *First Things*, 195 (Aug.–Sept 2009), p. 17, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/08/apocalypse-now>.

Also, as Kobo persuasively argued,⁵ in Africa, the emergence of a more Salafist, ‘Wahhabist’,⁶ or fundamentalist Islam since colonial days, and posing itself against the traditions and practices of an age-old ‘African Islam’, itself occurred in a ‘mirroring’ process *vis-à-vis* the modernity of colonialism.

For religious communities in Africa there is no ‘escape’ from contemporary totalizing processes of modernization in the form of ongoing globalization, forcing them to redefine their traditions, values and self-expression *vis-à-vis* others. Religion-based militancy and violence that frequently emerge here show themselves not to be a regression to old forms of identity struggle, but as a modernizing *response* to seek or recover a new identity and ‘purity’, usually with reference to ‘sacred values’, forming a transcendent motivational model that commands strong allegiance.⁷ I contend that violent religious activism among Muslims (the focus in this paper), either collective or individual,⁸ emanates from a fairly *unified* narrative that connects all cases and works via ideological contagion and mimesis. This also goes for the African cases referred to.

While religiously-inspired radical/violent movements are well-known in Africa—the large majority of Islamist character—care is needed in defining the terms and assessing the wider political and historical context—different from that in the Middle East or Europe—and obviously not all Muslim communities and leaders subscribe to extremist thought and violent activism; many are neutral or try to counter it.⁹ Islam does not equal ‘violence’,¹⁰ although it may have more of an ‘elective affinity’ toward militancy and violent reprisal in perceived conditions of threat.¹¹ Primarily, Islam is to be seen as a religious system or civilization and a supernatural frame of meaning and way of life for masses of people, that always interacted with other faith groups and the state. The confrontation with ‘modernity’ in a general sense also has led to genuine religious self-examination,¹² and in the case of many Muslim elites to a quest for a ‘return’ to origins and

⁵See Ousman Kobo, ‘The Development of Wahhabi Reforms in Ghana and Burkina Faso, 1960–1990: Elective Affinities between Western-educated Muslims and Islamic Scholars’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 52:3 (2009), pp. 504–505.

⁶The concept of ‘Wahhabism’ is widely used in scholarly literature (see previous note, and also the *Glossary* in A.P. Schmid, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London—New York, 2011) on p. 685 (‘*Salafīa Jihādīa*—Wahhabi jihadist doctrine exported from Saudi Arabia since the 1990s’) and p. 701. But it is of course contested, first and foremost by Salafists and Muslim purists (despite that they are often avid followers of Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab’s doctrines). One might describe it also as political Salafism, Saudi style.

⁷As emphasized in the research by Scott Atran, et al., ‘Devoted Actors Fight for Close Comrades and Sacred Cause’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111:50 (2014), pp. 17702–17703. M. Juergensmeyer spoke of the attitude of ‘moral presumption’ of terrorists (in his major book *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003], p. 11).

⁸Including the ‘lone wolf’ attacks.

⁹See, e.g., Sani Umar, ‘Salafi Narratives against Violent Extremism in Nigeria’, Lagos—Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development, CDD Monograph 1 (2015); Anon, ‘The Popular Discourses of Salafi Radicalism and Salafi Counter-Radicalism in Nigeria: a Case Study of Boko Haram’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 42 (2012), pp. 118–144.

¹⁰Cp. Lamin Sanneh, *Beyond Jihad. The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Jon Abbink, ‘Muslim Monasteries? Some Aspects of Religious Culture in Northern Ethiopia’, *Aethiopia*, 11 (2008), pp. 117–133. ‘Sufi’ sheikhs that I interviewed during fieldwork in rural Wollo, northern Ethiopia, in 2004, 2008 and 2012 did *not* appreciate violent *jihad* at all. The dubious passages in the Qur’an on the use of violence (e.g. (2:191, 9:5, 9:29, 9:30, 5:33, 22:19, 8:65, or 8:12) must be seen in historical context, although Islamists and Muslim exegetes would not agree.

¹¹Cf. J.D. Wright, ‘Why is Contemporary Religious Terrorism Predominantly Linked to Islam? Four Possible Psychosocial Factors’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10:1 (2016), pp. 19–31; and J. Liddle, K. Machluf, and T.K. Shackelford, ‘Understanding Suicide Terrorism: Premature Dismissal of the Religious-Belief Hypothesis’, *Evolutionary Psychology*, 8:3 (2010), pp. 343–345.

¹²Compare the analysis in A.A. Allawi, *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

sources, hence to follow and be inspired by the *Salaf al-Ṣāliḥīn* (the ‘pious forefathers/righteous predecessors’ of early Islam).

Muslim life in the Horn of Africa has shown remarkable and rich variety and is not by definition ‘politicized’; it is more of a communal, social identity. The same goes for Christianity, in its (Ethiopian-) Orthodox and other forms. Many Muslim communities have long-standing traditions of interaction and toleration vs. non-Muslims, although relations are never ‘conflict-free’.¹³ Crucial for communal peace and ‘getting along’ are: (a) an underlying, shared social structure of accommodation, and (b) in modern conditions, conducive state policies *vis-à-vis* religious identities, with juridical oversight and implementation of the constitutional mandate regarding (tolerance of) religion.

While one may cast doubt on the terms ‘religious extremism’ and ‘religious violence’, it is a fact that many religious movements and leaders throughout African history have explicitly and often easily resorted to violent means as a tool to realize political ends, with justification given in religious terms.¹⁴ This goes especially for Muslims (*jihad*¹⁵) but regularly also for Christians. Although of course Africa is not unique here, since a couple of decades there seems to be a resurgence of *religion as political narrative*,¹⁶ paralleling developments in Asia and the Near East, with a concomitant rise in militancy and/or terrorist action.

Theory and definitions

Recent developments in the field of religion and violence in Northeast Africa show patterns and trajectories also recognized elsewhere on the continent, like in Northern Nigeria, Mali after the collapse of the state, and in East Africa (with growing militant youth movements, mainly of Islamic bent). While primarily political-anthropological in nature, my theoretical approach to the unfolding of religion-based violence in Northeast Africa owes much to R. Girard’s well-known model of ‘mimetic rivalry’ in human behavior.¹⁷ Such rivalry is also exercised in the domain of religious relations. Communities, movements and leaders often fall into a discourse of *imitative identity struggle*, based

¹³See Jon Abbink, ‘An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 11:2 (1998), pp. 109–124.

¹⁴Cp. Shmuel Bar, *Jihad Ideology in Light of Contemporary Fatwas* (Washington, DC: Hudson Institute, 2006, Paper no. 1, Series no. 1). Even Sunni Islam’s center *Al Azhar* in Cairo was not immune to religious rulings that were highly questionable, e.g. condoning violence; see: Raymond Ibrahim, ‘Egyptian Cleric: ISIS Grows Out of Islamic Mainstream’, *Middle East Forum*, 25 November 2015, <http://www.meforum.org/blog/2015/11/isis-byproduct>. Also the well-known Shafī’i manual of religious law *Reliance of the Traveller* by Ahmed Ibn Naqib (14th century), certified as authoritative by Al-Azhar, approves of violent *jihad*.

¹⁵Originally meaning (personal) ‘effort, striving, exertion’, but after the conquest of Mecca by the prophet Mohammed in 630 CE it became already identified with (offensive) militant violent struggle on behalf of the faith; see M.C. Bassiouni, ‘Evolving Approaches to Jihad: From Self-defense to Revolutionary and Regime-change Political Violence’, *Chicago Journal of International Law*, 8:1 (2007), pp. 129–130. It was further theorized as such by the Muslim theologian A. ibn Taimiyya (1261–1328). Cp. E. Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 101.

¹⁶A few examples: J. Garnett and S.L. Hausner, eds, *Religion in Diaspora. Migration, Diasporas and Citizenship* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015); M. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 4th ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017); P. Mandaville and S. Hamid, *Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: Brookings, 2018); J. Habermas, ‘Religion in the Public Sphere’, *Philosophia Africana*, 8:2 (2009), pp. 99–109.

¹⁷René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by P. Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); see also H. Tinq, ‘Ce Qui se Joue Aujourd’hui Est une Rivalité Mimétique à l’Échelle Planétaire’, *Le Monde*, 5 November 2001, and Jean-Marc Bourdin, ‘The Rivalry of Equals: A Girardian Political Anthropology’, *Cités*, 53 (2013), pp. 33–40.

on differentiation and competition, whereby the ‘gain’ of the one is seen as ‘loss’ of the other.¹⁸ The modern, post-colonial state context in Africa has made such rivalries more relevant due to the political advantages of gaining more power or symbolic dominance at the national level. This does, however, not mean that the religiously styled violence is always directly grievance-based. ‘Grievance’ is a familiar trope in many analyses adopting a ‘victimhood’ perspective,¹⁹ but ideology and sacred values play as important a role, especially when held as supreme above those of all other groups. Many violent activists could rather said to be ‘glory-based’—on a quest for ‘purity’ and ‘martyrdom’. I also follow Girard in not assuming beforehand that religion *per se* is the direct *cause* of violence²⁰—it is at most an indirect one, because it is (situated) human beings that, for a variety of reasons, perpetrate the violence.²¹ Girard has controversially contended that notably *sacrificial* religious rituals were forms of contained violence, which unwittingly brought it under control. Once ‘exposed’ or religiously delegitimized, however, violence can go on in vicious cycles and move ‘toward extremes’. Mimetic rivalry mechanisms—inherent in human society—can easily become embroiled in religious conflict and when this happens, aggressive competition and violence are set to continue.

Finally, the interpretation of ‘religious violence’ in Africa followed here assumes a crucial role for the state and its legal–juridical institutions (or lack thereof) in influencing and conditioning religious politics and tensions. This leads to an additional theoretical perspective, that of political systems analysis. There is surely a relationship between state injustice and incapacity on the one hand and the emergence of alternative political programs and ideologies on the other, including religion-based radicalism or violent militancy. According to the empirical evidence, this holds especially for Muslim (Islamist) groups, both in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries. But not all violent or extremist action of this kind is directly ‘caused’ by state oppression or failure. In this paper I will refer to the legal framework of religion-state relations as laid down in constitutions and laws of the two main countries discussed. In thus exploring the formative impact of political and societal factors—i.e. allowing ‘history’ in—we can, via assessing the formation and expression of mimetic rivalries and their violent effects, also answer the need to extend Girard’s a-historical theory.

The definition of ‘religious violence’ and ‘religious extremism’ is complex. I define the first concept as: ‘contested armed action to hurt, incapacitate or kill others, based on ideas

¹⁸I do *not* necessarily adopt the theoretical point of Girard that all religion originates in unifying sacrificial rites via scapegoat mechanisms around a collectively identified innocent victim. But the generative principle of mimetic rivalry and the processes set in motion by it seem a universal feature of the human experience. It recalls what Hobbes said on mimesis in his *Leviathan* (1651) and what Spinoza said in the *Ethics* (1677) in Ill. 31, 32 (on ‘envy’) and 37. Mimetic rivalry is easily marshalled in identity politics. See for a critique on the universality of the ‘scapegoating’ mechanism: R. Landes, ‘A Millennial Critique of René Girard’s Thesis on Scapegoating’ (2008), <http://www.theaugeanstables.com/2008/09/01/a-millennial-critique-of-rene-girard%E2%80%99s-thesis-on-scapegoating/> (accessed June 5, 2017).

¹⁹Cf. Moses E. Ochonu dismantling this argument in the case of Nigeria’s ‘Boko Haram’, in ‘Toward a Better Understanding of Boko Haram’ (2014), http://theafricacollective.com/2014/06/18/toward-a-better-understanding-of-boko-haram/?relatedposts_hit=1&relatedposts_origin=467&relatedposts_position=0.

²⁰René Girard, ‘Violence and Religion: Cause or Effect?’ *The Hedgehog Review*, 6 (2004). See also: Hodge, et al, op. cit. (see note 1). Girard posits that the gradual *abandonment* of religious rituals with real or symbolic sacrificial violence has unleashed other forms of violence in society, with no bounds, destructive, and tending toward extremes (ibid.). Compare also his *Achever Clausewitz* (Paris: Carnets Nord, 2007), pp. 12–13; and (Girard, op. cit., note 4 above).

²¹A strong contrary view is taken by many analysts, including Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005). Cf. also: Lorne L. Dawson, ‘Discounting Religion in the Explanation of Home-grown Terrorism: A Critique’, in J.R. Lewis (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 32–45.

justified by religion or related supernatural appeals, supposedly giving it legitimacy beyond human motives'. Religious extremism is: 'supremacist, aggressively voiced ideas or ideologies rooted in supernatural notions, based on convictions immune to debate, dialogue, reflexivity or criticism and denigrating non-group members'. Extremism *can* lead to violent action to hurt or eliminate others, but it is first and foremost a *mindset* exercised on or toward others. In a sense, all 'religious violence' (such as the religiously-motivated 'suicide terrorism' and mass-killing attacks as perpetrated by, e.g. the Afghan Taliban, the Somali Al-Shabaab or the Nigerian Boko Haram) is based on extremism, but not all extremism is or leads directly to violence. E.g. 'Salafists' are often extremists in their exclusivist, supremacist and frequently *takfiri* attitudes towards others (i.e. labeling and denigrating Sufi and other mainstream Muslims as well as non-Muslims as *kafir*, 'unbelievers'), but they are not all violent or 'terrorist'.²² As various authors noted, the categorization of Salafists as (violent) extremists and Sufists as accommodative and peaceful is doubtful. In African history these categories have shown to be fluid.²³

Descriptions of what we in the rest of the paper will call 'religious violence/extremism' abound in the recent political science and sociological literature and are often similar in nature, as are the motives and reasons given to explain it: discrimination, repression, material grievances, feelings of humiliation of the faithful, or socio-economic inequality and marginalization. As noted above, my take will be that to explain Islamist violence only with a 'grievance-based' or 'structural violence' model, i.e. to label the perpetrators always as 'victims', is not satisfactory. There *may* indeed be a combination of perceptions and experiences of marginalization,²⁴ relative poverty, social inequality, gender inequality²⁵ and socialization problems in Muslim countries, next to psychological feelings of being victimized or slighted—whether justified or not. But these elements are more often than not augmented by emphatic political-ideological justification based on religious argument, regularly with (selective) reference to certain *suras* in the Qur'an. W. Palaver has contended²⁶ that the popularity of 'vengeful religious lament' (using Elias Canetti's term, in *Crowds and Power*, 1960) is clear, and has become '... a common dimension of contemporary incidents of religiously—and also secular—motivated violence, especially of terrorism' (p. 10). This holds both for international terrorism as well as for religious violence/extremism *within* states. Religiously-inspired violent or terrorist movements/activists are more often than not well-versed in ideological-theological knowledge and reasoning.²⁷

²²Terrorism definitions are contested, although A. Schmid has tried to draw up a more encompassing one in his 'The Definition of Terrorism', in A.P. Schmid, (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, pp. 39–98. It includes 'state-sponsored' terrorism (ibid., p. 86). The search for an ACD (= academic consensus definition, ibid., p. 42) seems to aim for an essentialist definition, while a nominal one would suffice. I define terrorism here nominally here as: 'the unlawful use by state or non-state actors or groups of indiscriminate, unexpected violence against persons or property, with the aim to maim, intimidate, kill, spread fear, or coerce people or governments and/or civilians, often done for 'political' aims'.

²³Cf. Terje Østebø, 'African Salafism: Religious Purity and the Politicization of Purity', *Islamic Africa*, 6 (2015), pp. 1–29; also Mark Woodward, et al. (eds), 'Salafi Violence and Sufi Tolerance? Rethinking Conventional Wisdom', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 7 (2013), www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/311/html.

²⁴See for instance, Mohamed Yahya, 'African Countries are Particularly Vulnerable to Violent Terrorism. How to Change this', *World Economic Forum*, 15 January 2017, www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/african-countries-are-particularly-vulnerable-to-violent-terrorism-how-to-change-this.

²⁵Cf. Ronald W. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, 'The True Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Policy*, 135 (2003), pp. 62–70.

²⁶Wolfgang Palaver, 'Mimetic Theories of Religion and Violence', in M. Jerryson, M. Juergensmeyer, and M. Kitts (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 10.

²⁷The Muslim tradition does not lack text sources and judgements which can be construed as supportive of 'religious' violence; cf. Shmuel Bar, 'The Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism', *Hoover Institution Policy Review*, 125 (2004), pp. 27–37.

The African context: historical canvas, contemporary dynamics

In Africa, religion-based violence and extremism in ideological, organized form were known well before 9 November 2001. For example, in the Muslim conquest of North Africa in the 7th–9th centuries, the *jihadi* campaigns in West Africa in the 17th–19th centuries (e.g. the Fulani-based *jihād* of ‘Uthman dan Fodio or of *Shehu* Ahmadu Lobbo of Macina), or the 16th century war (from 1529 to 1543) in the Ethiopian-Somali border areas, led by the Harar-Somali Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, that spread to the highland interior and almost destroyed the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and its religious infrastructure (churches, monasteries). These devastating episodes were motivated with calls to supreme religious identity and authority (of Islam),²⁸ but always intermingled with territorial, economic and political power motives. Both expanding Christianity (notably after colonialism started, but long before that in Egypt, Sudan and medieval Ethiopia, the latter conducting armed campaigns against Muslim principalities on its borders) and Islamic conversions created a landscape of tension and competition between different ethnic and religious communities that consolidated societal pluralism.

In the colonial period since the late nineteenth century, Muslim populations were confronted with modernity in the form of new, authoritarian administration, education, and other religions or political ideologies, inducing many to adopt the new ways and others to develop counter-narratives of resistance. The colonial and post-colonial context was important, and many (violent) anti-colonial resistance movements became infused with a religious character. One example is the Mahdist movement in the Turco-Egyptian Sudan since 1881, leading to a major armed revolt (and rule in Khartoum) that also devastated parts of North-western Ethiopia and was finally defeated in 1898 by the British. In Somali areas there was local resistance to the British and Italians from 1900 to 1920 under a religiously inspired revivalist leader, *Sayyid* Muhammad Abdullah Hassan, who revolted as much in the name of Islam as in that of the colonized Somali nation.²⁹ In former British colonies, branches of the Muslim Brotherhood—created in 1928 in Egypt as part of the ‘Islamic awakening’—were founded, although these were by far not all aimed towards violence. There emerged, however, an important strand of Islamist thinking and activism in the twentieth century, examples of which were Egyptian authors such as Egyptian *Sayyid* Qutb (1906–66), Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj (d. 1982), or Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (1926–),³⁰ and Pakistani theologian Said Abul Al’a al-Maududi (1903–79), all of them marked by *jihadi* rather than ‘moderate’ views, seeing *jihād* as primarily a form of violent struggle (*qital*).

Guided by religious elites, many Muslim populations were thus confirmed in, rather than alienated from, their religious identity and often they came to see their faith as an ideological bulwark and tool against ‘Western modernity’—however diffuse this concept was. In postcolonial Africa, state authority was much contested and the political-economic

²⁸See Chihab ad-Din, *Futūḥ al-Habaša (The Conquest of Abyssinia)*, edited by P.L. Stenhouse and R. Pankhurst (Hollywood, Ca.—Addis Ababa: Tsehai Publishers, 2003), p. 21, 26, 41, 58, 80, 384.

²⁹Said Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayid Mahammed Abdille Hassan* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982); Jon Abbink, ‘Dervishes, *Moryaan* and Freedom Fighters: Cycles of Rebellion and the Fragmentation of Somali Society, 1900–2000’, in J. Abbink, et al. (eds), *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 328–365. The *Sayyid* also had many Somali enemies, which probably became his undoing.

³⁰An allegedly mainstream and quite influential Muslim thinker. For a taste of his thinking, see: www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDtSqciar0; and www.youtube.com/watch?v=huMu8ihDIVA (accessed June 5, 2017).

record of most regimes disappointing. But activism and political resistance were initially more inspired by Socialist ideals, democratic aspirations and ethno-regal identities than by religious narratives. In the late 1980s, religiously inspired social movements and revolts emerged in the crumbling political order in Africa, or rather, came out in the open. The chief event was the take-over of power in 1989 in Sudan by the National Islamic Front (NIF, a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood), under General Omar al Bashir and NIF-religious leader Hassan al Tourabi, installing the first Islamist regime in Africa. In other African countries, Islam-inspired social movements and youth organizations also emerged (in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, or Somalia), but they competed with other political organizations. Many African Muslims were educated at the Islamic University of Medina and other colleges in Saudi Arabia, and upon return to their countries gave an impetus to Salafist outlooks. A similar story can be told about the 'International University of Africa' in Khartoum, founded in 1977 with Saudi money and strongly expanded by the al Tourabi/al Bashir regime in Sudan.

After '9/11', the discourse of violence emerged and was propagated by religious-terrorist movements and activists in Africa. Global examples, catalyzed by the *Al Qaeda* network (not only the US events, but also those in the Near East, Pakistan or Afghanistan), were important. Such violence took on a different character, its ideology and symbolism of 'martyrdom' infused with deep mimetic rivalry and enmity versus the 'religious others', often so as to deny them existence.³¹ Religion-based extremist/violent movements emerged in many countries, from Somalia to Nigeria to Uganda to Burkina Faso.³² *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, *Ansar al-Din* in Mali, *Boko Haram* (Nigeria), and *Ansar al-Shari'a* (in at least five African countries) are among the movements now active. They generalized religion-based 'warfare', and their narratives and activities had a deeply contagious effect.³³ In this respect, movements are ideologically connected and appeal to a similar sub-text of grievances and resentment, converted into predominantly Islamist war against 'Others' whose mere existence, let alone political system and laws, are often seen as unacceptable. The starkest example of this is the Nigerian 'Boko Haram',³⁴ whose leaders repeatedly made statements literally proclaiming this.³⁵

Most Sub-Saharan African countries—except Somalia and Sudan,³⁶ both with Islam as state religion—have a *secular* constitution; i.e. no state religion is prescribed, even though most of the countries have a clear denominational majority (Christian or Muslim). Levels

³¹See, for instance, the interesting paper by Wolfgang Palaver, 'Enmity and Political Identity: Friend-enemy Patterns and Religion', *Jnanadeepa—Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, 8:1 (2005), pp. 39–49.

³²See the map on: <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/militant-islamic-groups-as-of-Apr-2017-with-bullets.pdf> (accessed July 2, 2018).

³³In October 2017 the first home-grown Islamist terror attack occurred in *Mozambique*, a country not known for any 'anti-Muslim' repression (<http://theconversation.com/why-islamist-attack-demands-a-careful-response-from-mozambique-85504>, accessed December 5, 2017).

³⁴Their real name is a genuine Muslim one: *Jama'atu Ahlu al-Sunnah li-Da'awati wal-Jihad* (= Association of the People of the Sunna for Conversion and Jihad).

³⁵In May 2014 chief commander A. Shekau, said:

Until we soak the ground of Nigeria with Christian blood and so-called Muslims contradicting Islam. After we have killed, killed, killed, and get fatigued and wonder what to do with smelling of their corpses — smelling of Obama, Bush and [then Nigerian president] Goodluck Jonathan — then we will open prison and imprison the rest. Infidels have no value. See: <https://www.trackingterrorism.org/article/who-real-abubakar-shekau-aka-abu-muhammad-abubakar-bin-muhammad-boko-harams-renegade-warlord> (accessed August 23, 2017)

³⁶Sudan until the Spring of 2019 (when regime change occurred) had a problematic Islamist regime since 1989 that wrought havoc and war in the region. See Suliman Baldo, *Radical Intolerance: Sudan's Religious Oppression and Embrace of Extremist Groups* (Washington, DC: The Enough Project, 2017).

of popular religious adherence, however, are very high; in other words, society is not 'secular'. The Pew Research Center 2010 survey report on religion in Africa found that the vast majority of Africans were deeply committed to Islam or Christianity, and that many even thought that the *shari'a* or the Bible, respectively, should be made official law in the country.³⁷

Still, the course that religious militancy or violence takes is quite divergent in the different African countries, showing a variety of local historical contexts, modes of interaction with the wider society, and complex internal relations, i.e. *within* the religious communities. A comparison of Somalia and Ethiopia makes this clear.

Somalia—Islamist terrorism challenging the state

Somalia has seen high levels of violence the past two decades with a persistent radical-Islamist movement carrying out multiple violent attacks. Somalia is a majority Muslim country; ca. 99% Somalis are Sunni (Shafi'i law tradition) and historically the mainstream is of Sufi bent, with a strong role of the mystical orders like Qadiriyya, Ahmadiyya and Tijjaniyya. Somali Islam always had a strong 'national' identity but since a couple of decades it is more inspired by foreign Muslim thinkers and propagandists. After the late 1980s the influence of 'reformist', i.e. puritanical Salafist and *Muwahhidun* ('Wahhabism')-inspired strands, has grown, especially since 1991 when the central state collapsed and Islamic groups became stronger (*Al Ittihad al Islami*, *Al Islah*, and *Hizbul Islam*).³⁸

Since ca. 2005 the radical-Islamist movement *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahiddeen* (Movement of Young Jihad Combatants) is active in Somalia, pursuing a most militant and violent form of Islamist activism, with killings of Somalis (and foreigners) who do not subscribe to its brand of Islam, and rejecting any form of democracy—seen as religiously unacceptable because 'man-made'. *Al-Shabaab* emerged as a successor movement to the 'Islamic Courts Union' (ICU),³⁹ a non-state alliance that had tried to install law and order in Somalia in the post-1991 chaos (state collapse), based on religious (*shari'a*) precepts. They filled the space left after the demise of the abusive, violent reign of the Somali clan-'warlords'. While the ICU had made a promising start in restoring order and enforcing law, the Islamist militia which later became Al-Shabaab claimed religious and political supremacy and did not accept any effort to rebuild a new Somali government and state. A long and controversial political process occurring since the mid-1990s, hesitantly supported by the UN and the international community, led to a Federal Government emerging in August 2012; precarious, but on a relatively broad and more inclusive basis. However, all through the process Al-Shabaab rejected this reconstitution of state authority and kept fighting for a fully 'Islamic regime', claiming to represent the 'real' Islam in Somalia.⁴⁰ The movement acted mainly via intimidation and terror attacks on government personnel, journalists, civilians, and clerics who opposed them,⁴¹ and also developed non-

³⁷Pew Research Center, *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, DC, 2010), p. 10.

³⁸Cf. Haggai Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa: Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan* (Boulder, Co.—London: Lynne Rienner, 2010), chapter 7.

³⁹In fact, emanating from a radical faction of the militia.

⁴⁰In 2010 they incorporated the other radical-Islamist movement, *Hizbul Islam*.

⁴¹They also pioneered 'suicide bombing' in Somalia: the first one was on 18 September 2006.

state predatory economic activities. They received a boost of nationalist support after Ethiopia's military invasion of Somalia in 2006 ('at the request' of a fledgling transitional government in Mogadishu). Further support Al-Shabaab had on the ground rested on providing services to rural people in the absence of the state, e.g. in the field of law and order (mediating disputes), basic medical provisions, or market organization.⁴² But broad support did not last. Their ideology of Islamist supremacism led them to use crude violence to impose their version of Islam on all people and to attack or drive out their rivals, Sufist clerics, and representatives of Somali transitional (since 2012 federal) government. When violence (including *hudūd* punishments), extortion and child soldier recruitment continued (up to today), it became difficult to see—also for most Somalis—what Al-Shabaab's legitimacy was, or how and why their (ill-elaborated) political program should be realized. They never engaged in talks or negotiations with government representatives or civic organizations, except local clan elders. Al-Shabaab's reign came to rest upon pervasive violent tactics and intimidation, both in its control of the rural population and in its policies towards perceived competitors—the state, Sufist leaders, dissenting clan representatives and associations, and foreigners (NGOs, UN, AU peace-keeping forces).

A long string of terror attacks marks Al-Shabaab's record to date, with next to federal government personnel, media people and AMISOM soldiers, also thousands of civilians killed. A characteristic operation was the 12 December 2009 suicide-bombing in Mogadishu ripping through a graduation ceremony of medical students, killing 24 people, including future doctors, four government ministers, and three journalists. The government at the time was led by a moderate Islamist, President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, and showed that Al-Shabaab in its self-declared 'holy war' had no qualms killing fellow-Muslims and civilians. And in October 2017 a truck bombing of a Mogadishu market area resulted in more than 500 people killed, many of them women and children. This led to mass demonstrations against the movement, but the pattern of defying the Somali government via constant bloodletting of non-combatants to show the powerlessness of the authorities has persisted. While Al-Shabaab lost much adherence and legitimacy among Somalis, it is not easily defeated.⁴³

Perennial debate in- and outside Somalia concerns the issue of whether Al-Shabaab⁴⁴ members 'are Muslim or not'. They themselves of course claim they are, and all of their statements refer to the Qur'an and Islamic law—the same body of religious thought that their opponents in Somalia take as authoritative. So, it seems a question of interpretation. No doubt Al-Shabaab takes an extremist interpretation, deviating from the Somali and perhaps African Muslim mainstream. But it is similar to the Saudi-style 'Muwahhidūn' ('Wahhabi') or Salafi tradition introduced in the eighteenth century in Arabia by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792),⁴⁵ later taken up by radical thinkers/

⁴²See for their partly successful legitimization strategies and propaganda in the post-1991 Somali political void: Oscar G. Mwangi, 'State Collapse, *Al-Shabaab*, Islamism, and Legitimacy in Somalia', *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 13 (2012), pp. 513–527.

⁴³See Sunguta West, 'The Resurgence of Al Shabaab', *Terrorism Monitor*, 16 (2018), pp. 6–7.

⁴⁴The name of course means The Youth, but they are no longer 'youths' and led by veteran hard-core Islamists, including some Islamist clerics that returned from having lived abroad, e.g. in the UK and Sweden.

⁴⁵Inspired by the radical Sunni theologian T. ibn Taimiyyah (1263–1328). M. ibn Abd al-Wahhab pursued his 'reforms' with harsh means of repression, stoning, and killing of opponents, especially after his alliance with the Najd ruler, Muhammad ibn Saud, in 1747. His active support of violent *jihad* is referred to in Hussein ibn Ghannam, *Tarikh Najd* (Riyadh: Dar al-

theologians like Al' a al-Maududi (1903–79) and the Muslim Brotherhood founders and adherents in the twentieth century—all hard-core proponents of a more political Islam not eschewing religious violence. In 2013 a council of some 160 Somali mainstream clerics issued a *fatwa* rejecting Al-Shabaab as ‘... having strayed from the correct path of Islam’ and as ‘a danger to the Islamic religion and the existence of the Somali society’.⁴⁶ But Al-Shabaab-sympathetic clerics denied its validity, suggesting Islam mandates their own interpretation. This is one illustration of the fact that, as Bonino recently argued,⁴⁷ there are different forms of ‘political Islam’: non-violent and violent (like Al Shahaab).

In 2019 the Al Shabaab movement—with its leaders repeatedly targeted by USA special forces and drones, as well as combated by the AMISOM peace-keeping forces—still pursues its ideological-extremist agenda, vehemently anti-government (against *any* form of government), anti-international peace-keeping forces, anti-UN and anti-mainstream Somali Islam. Their political Islamism is uncompromising and their terrorist tactics unchanged, always ‘justified’ with appeals to Islam and ‘purity’. They see themselves as ‘reformists’ and as the ‘real’ Muslims, with their violence as liberating and ‘cleansing’. One of their aims is to unite the Somali clans and sub-clans under Islam (analogies are drawn with the tribal *jahiliyya*—‘ignorance’, chaos—before the time of the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia), and establish an exclusivist Islamist state: an extreme ‘Salafist’ movement strengthened by an appeal to foreign models (and funding). In 2012 Al-Shabaab leaders had declared adherence to Al Qa’eda, and some sections in 2016 expressed loyalty to the ISIS (‘Da’esh’). In addition, they established links with the Boko Haram in Nigeria and with related extremist groups like *Al Hijra* and *Jaysh al Ayman* in Kenya.⁴⁸

The Somali Federal Government (2012–) has not succeeded in establishing its authority over all of Somalia in either the political or religious domain, and falls short of providing services, education, etc. for citizens. Political space is still essentially contested and many people are dependent on local customary and religious authorities for the maintenance of law and order—which often works well. As noted above, in some areas Al-Shabaab was able to offer this—on the basis of *shari’a* only, and under strongly coercive rule. They also found support among youths because of their payment of allowances/salaries. The government authorities and armed forces lack efficiency, predictability and unity, and suffer from serious corruption.

Under the current Somali Federal Constitution (2012), Islam is the state religion. In Article 2 (‘State and Religion’) it says: ‘(1) Islam is the religion of the State. (2) No religion other than Islam can be propagated in the country. (3) No law can be enacted that is not compliant with the general principles and objectives of *shari’a*’.⁴⁹ This imposition of

Thuluthiyyah, 2010), vol. 2; and Uthman ibn Bishr, *Unwan al-Majd fi Tarikh Najd* (Riyadh: Matbu’at Darat al-Malik ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, 1982), vol. 1: p. 46, p. 65, pp. 69–72.

⁴⁶See: ‘Somali Islamic Scholars Denounce al-Shabab in Fatwa’, *BBC News*, 12 September 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-24057725>.

⁴⁷Stefano Bonino, ‘Violent and Non-violent Political Islam in a Global Context’, *Political Studies Review*, 16:1 (2018), pp. 46–59.

⁴⁸Cf. Hassan J. Ndzovu, ‘The Rise of Jihad, Killing of “Apostate Imams” and Non-combatant Christian Civilians in Kenya: Al Shabaab’s Redefinition of the Enemy on Religious Lines’, *Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and its Diaspora*, 3, pp. 4–20. Also: Sunguta West, ‘Jaysh al-Ayman: a “Local Threat” in Kenya’, *Terrorism Monitor*, 16:8 (2018), pp. 3–5.

⁴⁹In Art. 17, it says, somewhat contradictory, that ‘(1) Every person is free to practice his or her religion. 2) No religion other than Islam can be propagated in the Federal Republic of Somalia’.

Islam—in fact, a statement against religious freedom—reflects the adherence of 99% of Somalis to Islam, but was probably included by the drafters to ideologically undercut the then armed Islamist opposition (Hizbul Islam and Al-Shabaab). The Government wanted to pre-empt any religious reasoning of the radical Islamists to claim legitimacy as the ‘real Islamic’ political leaders. Al-Shabaab, on the other hand, sees the constitution as a ‘godless document’ without validity because ‘man-made’ and not exclusively based on *shari’a*. These attitudes give rise to continued rivalry about the definition and status of Islam as a political force and thus to violent struggle to impose it. The terrorist agenda of Islam as embodied by Al-Shabaab is contested but entrenched in Somali society—especially among youth strata that have missed out on basic education for decades and are disoriented. It continues to be in cyclical rivalry with both the federal state representatives and the mainstream Sufi-oriented Muslims. As they both share the recognition of Islam as state religion and of its major impact on national law and politics, in the long run a dialogue process would seem the solution to engage both sides and negotiate to defuse the violent agendas.

Ethiopia—ambivalence of the secular constitutional order and ‘containment’ of Muslim mobilization

One third of Ethiopia’s population of ca. 105 mln. in 2018 is *Sunni* Muslim, largely following the Shafi’i school of legal thought. *Sufism* or mystical Islam has long been popular in Ethiopia, with the Qadiriyya and the Tijjaniyya orders (*turuq*) widely present. Islam in Ethiopia was always decentralized, knew regional varieties, and was deeply rooted in the country, often in interaction with the Christian environment. Religious commitment also varied significantly, with many practicing Islam in a relaxed and selective manner. Islam gave rise to certain syncretic forms as well patterns of accommodation, as for instance in the region of Wollo, where the faith first spread since the early 11th century, and not via violence. Here a *habitus* of tolerance emerged in a pattern of long-standing quotidian social practices. Religious identities were seen as shared heritage of the region and no one seemed interested in emphasizing or sharpening the boundaries, although rivalry was not absent.⁵⁰

In the case of Islam, Ethiopia provides a case of state-religious community relations that is in many ways *the reverse* of Somalia: no state religion, a balance of religious communities, with Islam not as a majority but as a large minority (34%), and strong state surveillance and state pre-eminence over organized religion (also on Orthodox Christianity). In recent decades Ethiopia has not been marked by escalating Christian or Islamist-inspired terrorist violence, except a few series of burnings of (Sufi) mosques and churches and incidents of seemingly targeted ‘religious killings’. The presence of small radical-militant Muslim groups and *Takfiris* (radicals ‘excommunicating’ and declaring other Muslims as ‘enemy’) was reported in the late 1990s⁵¹ but these were suppressed, and remnants are monitored. Nevertheless, since 1991 a clear process of doctrinal radicalization

⁵⁰See: Éloi Ficquet, ‘Patterns of Coexistence and Rivalry between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. The Case of Wällo in the Central Highlands’, *Civiltà del Mediterraneo*, 16–17 (2010), pp. 247–259.

⁵¹*Takfir wal Hijra* extremist Muslim groups; locally called ‘Khawarijij’. See Dereje Feyissa, *The Potential for and Signs of Religious Radicalization in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, Research Report Submitted to DFID-Ethiopia, March 2011), pp. 7–8, 16. In 2009 the Khawarijij announced that their members would refuse to pay taxes or hold Ethiopian ID-cards (ibid.).

among Muslims occurred (Also among Protestant-Evangelical and Orthodox Christians, in a largely reactive move).⁵²

Ethiopia abolished the Orthodox-Christian religion as state religion in 1974 (Ethiopian revolution era) and in the Socialist Constitution of 1984 religion and state were separated, with most properties of the Orthodox Church confiscated and its leaders replaced or co-opted. Muslims were given in principle equal rights and could form a representative organization. The Ethiopian Constitution of 1995, introduced by the ethno-federal regime of the ruling party EPRDF,⁵³ continued the secular statute. Key is Art. 11: '1. State and religion are separate. 2. There shall be no state religion. 3. The state shall not interfere in religious matters and religion shall not interfere in state affairs'.⁵⁴ What was exactly meant by the latter remained unclear: what constitutes 'interference', and especially when and how religion might be seen to interfere in state affairs (These were to be the main issues in the later confrontations between Muslim community leaders/organizations and the state authorities in the 2011–2015 period). In Art. 27, religious freedom was further defined, e.g. in 27.1 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', and in 27.2 to freely organize. But in Art. 27.5 it said:

Freedom to express or manifest one's religion or belief may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, peace, health, education, public morality or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others, and to ensure the independence of the state from religion.

This gave the state leeway to 'monitor' religious life and self-organizations in the light of wider national aims, i.e. *beyond* the perceptions of the religious communities themselves. The deciding role of the federal state was also enhanced by Art. 90.2: 'Education shall be provided in a manner that is free from any religious influence, political partisanship or cultural prejudices'. I.e. all state-sponsored public education was to be free from undue religious teachings and practices. Muslims protested against these regulations but were not able to change them, and on a local, institutional level many of their demands (e.g. for prayer spaces in schools/universities) were even met. A final interesting aspect of the constitution is that religious law as such was not recognized except in the case of the *shari'a* courts, for personal status/family law matters (in articles 34.5 and 78.5). As Corazza has noted,⁵⁵ here Islam is treated differently from other faiths (which do not receive recognition; e.g. Orthodox church law is *not* mentioned), seemingly an infringement on the 'secularity' of the Constitution.

Since 1991, religious freedom as guaranteed in the above clauses was fully utilized and multiple new religious actors emerged, both domestic and foreign. In Ethiopia, as in the rest of Africa, religious freedom did *not* lead to a weakening of religion or of significant

⁵²'Radicalization' here defined as a process of people developing towards an exclusivist-dogmatic and militant mindset, with strong enemy images and (in the case of religion) forceful conversion purposes. Radicalisation does *not* equal extremism, but is usually a preliminary stage to it.

⁵³Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, the umbrella ethno-regional front with four parties with at its core the militarily dominant TPLF, victorious after the civil war ending in May 1991. EPRDF was still the sole ruling party in 2018, but power within it shifted from the TPLF to three other constituent parties after February that year under the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who led the party into reform and a new name in November 2019: the Prosperity Party.

⁵⁴For the text, see: <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/et/et007en.pdf>.

⁵⁵Marta T. Corazza, 'State and Religion in the Constitution and Politics of Ethiopia', *European Journal for Church and State Research*, 9:1 (2002), p. 389.

growth of agnostic or non-believing communities, but to more religious ‘identity politics’, perhaps to compensate for the absence of security and political freedoms. No doubt a general process of revival, and also radicalization, of religious thinking and identification occurred. Numerous Muslims, notably of the younger generation, adopted a discourse of ‘correct’ scriptural Islam, ‘purity’, and often also exclusivist claims and dogmatism, with agitation against the established Muslim religious authorities and practices. On the Christian side many global Pentecostals and Evangelicals (re-)connected to local Christians—and vice versa—and started both conversion campaigns as well as social, pastoral and development work. The new Evangelical-Protestant and Pentecostal groups in particular quickly ‘indigenized’ and generated a new dynamic of tension in the country, strongly activist and expansive, especially toward the Ethiopian Orthodox Church—the former national church. I.e. paradoxically, *within* the Christian population a discourse of mimetic rivalry regarding the ‘right’ form of Christianity was opened up as well, continuing to this day.

Muslims connected more to foreign, especially Saudi Arabian/Middle Eastern resources and ideas, which permeated Ethiopia in the 1990s and early 2000s via, for instance, the Muslim World League and many private Arab funders. Thus, major centers of Salafist and ‘Wahhabist’ (*Muwahiddūn*) thought and practice emerged,⁵⁶ although several already had a basis in the country; not all Ethiopian Muslims before the revivalist wave corresponded to the stereotype of ‘quietist, non-radical’ Sufi Muslims. Muslim *da’wa* groups like the *Ja’amat al Tabligh* (of Pakistani origins and active across Africa) and some others also established branches in Ethiopia, and claimed large sections of the younger generation of (notably Gurage and Borana) Muslims with their ‘reformist’ or revivalist programs, rivaling with Sufist-mainstream and also Salafi Islam. Thus, new Muslim identities emerged in Ethiopia.

One important center of ‘reformist’ Islam after 1991 was the ‘Awoliya Mosque and School’ in Addis Ababa that became a kind of cadre school for young Muslim activists and reformers, largely funded by Saudi Arabia (Muslim World League), and anti the Muslim establishment in Ethiopia. By the latter were meant the pro-regime Muslim leaders as represented in the government-approved Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC),⁵⁷ and also the large strand of mostly rural-based Sufi sheikhs and practitioners that might be considered as a form of local, popular Islam. The process of Muslim revivalism in general reflects major socio-economic and demographic changes in Ethiopia that have advanced the social position and public presence of Muslims and lessened their much vaunted historical ‘marginality’.⁵⁸

The process was not without actual armed conflict either. After the installation of the new regime in May 1991 followed a period of political insecurity, and various armed movements remained active. As in other periods of regime transition in Ethiopia, several movements, including religion-based ones, re-emerged. One of them was the militant *Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromiya* (founded in 1985), influenced by Salafist thought. It carried out a radical agenda of furthering the Muslim Oromo cause,⁵⁹ including

⁵⁶An in-depth overview of this role of Saudi sources and efforts, and their political aspects, was given in Haggai Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia. Islam, Christianity and Politics Intertwined* (Boulder, Co.—London: Lynne Rienner, 2007).

⁵⁷Locally called the *Majlis*, instituted in 1976.

⁵⁸Cp. Éloi Ficquet, ‘The Ethiopian Muslims: Historical Processes and Ongoing Controversies’, in G. Prunier and E. Ficquet (eds), *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia* (London: C. Hurst), pp. 93–122.

⁵⁹Ca. 55% of the Oromo, the largest people in Ethiopia, are Muslim.

chasing out and killing non-Muslims in Oromo-inhabited areas in 1991–92. The Somalia-based *Al Ittihad al Islami* (see above) also had bases in Southeast Ethiopia in the 1990s and carried out armed attacks. There were numerous instances of Christian–Muslim clashes in different regional states as well, including attacks on places of worship. Religion and ethnicity became intertwined in new local territorial conflicts. In general, more competition emerged to redefine Ethiopia’s religious landscape and national ‘identity’.

That radical or extremist thinking also developed in the wake of the ‘religious freedom’ statute under the Constitution was evident from a new wave of *polemical* literature, media products and Internet sources, in part with translated religious writings and messages by foreign revivalist or extremist Muslim preachers-activists, like the South African Ahmed Deedat⁶⁰ or the Indian Zakir Naik.⁶¹ Many publications were circulated and YouTube clips appeared of new preachers with harsh and dogmatic messages going against the mainstream discourse of (predominantly) moderation and tolerance.⁶² As Samson has aptly noted in a study of Zakir Naik’s influence: in this ‘hyper-reality’ of mediated religious products, communal conflict ‘... is generated *a priori* to any actual or real conflict’.⁶³ Orthodox and Protestant-Evangelical-Christians entered the fray, either to answer the Muslim charges or to combat each other, and deeply polemic identity battles emerged in news magazines, DVDs and VCDs with missionizing sermons and performances that were on sale in the streets, and in the past decade Internet sites and social media were much used.

In 1995 there was sectarian violence within the Muslim community, including the killing of twelve well-known religious leaders in the Anwar Mosque compound in Addis Ababa. There were also confrontations between Orthodox Christians and Protestants-Evangelicals particularly in the South of the country; and in 2006 followed deadly Muslim–Christian clashes in western Ethiopia (Jimma city) and some other places, with hundreds of people killed. Again, March 2011 saw another wave of attacks on places of worship and killings in various parts of the country.

These clashes and killings in what appeared as a wave of ‘religious violence’ prompted the Ethiopian government to devise an ‘anti-extremist’ policy towards Muslims. The perception was that the growing ‘reformist’, revivalist-scriptural Islam, that had profited from the constitutional right to religious freedom, was radicalizing people and that the common Ethiopian Muslim masses were in danger of being hijacking by radicals and ‘fundamentalists’ (in Amharic: *akrariwoch*, ‘fanatics’). Up to a point this perception was justified, because complaints to this effect were also heard among many Muslims. In 2008 a new directive was already issued by the Ministry of Education to regulate the role and expression of religious belief in educational institutions.⁶⁴

⁶⁰See: Samadia Sadouni, ‘Ahmed Deedat, Internationalisation, and Transformations of Islamic Polemic’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 43:1 (2013), pp. 53–73.

⁶¹Analysed in: Samson A. Bezabeh, ‘Living across Digital Landscapes: Muslim, Orthodox Christians and an Indian Guru in Ethiopia’, in R.I.J. Hackett and B.F. Soares (eds), *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa* (Bloomington—Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), pp. 266–283. See also: Jon Abbink, ‘Religion in Public Spaces: Emerging Muslim–Christian Polemics in Ethiopia’, *African Affairs*, 110 (2011), pp. 253–274.

⁶²A particular example was a statement via YouTube where Ethiopian Muslims said they did not accept the Constitution and placed *shari’a* above it: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwKtoBDDwTQ>. Also the remarks by other Ethiopian Muslims in the comments section were revealing (accessed May 5, 2018).

⁶³Samson, op. cit., p. 281 (see note 42).

⁶⁴BeTimhirt Tequam yeAmleko Ser’attinna beMimelekket yeWotta’ Memriya (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Education, Memo, Hidar 2000 EC (= 2008 CE)).

Since the summer of 2011 a great clash between the government and the Muslim community emerged. At issue was ‘non-interference’ of the state in religious affairs. In July that year the government started a ‘training program’ on constitutional issues and matters of religion and state relations, for Muslim religious leaders. For this purpose, they invited members of the *Al-Ahbash*, a Sufist association⁶⁵ based in Lebanon, although with a modest presence in Ethiopia and known for its non-political, accommodative stance in religious matters.⁶⁶ It was founded by an Ethiopian cleric, *sheikh* Abdullah al Harari (1910–2006). The government of then Prime Minister Meles Zenawi thought they could be used to inculcate a non-political Islam, in line with constitutional values, that would connect to the presumed tolerant mainstream Sufist Islam in Ethiopia and be against the new ‘Wahhabist’-Salafist variants that had emerged after 1991. The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) was tasked with implementing the program nationwide. Training sessions were indeed held in many places. But resistance against this prescribed program was significant. It reminded people of the obligatory political training sessions of the EPRDF ruling party on ‘developmentalism’ that were held in educational and government institutions. One of the young Muslim leaders, Abubakr Ahmed, at the time said that they protested not the ‘sect’ (al-Ahbash) itself, but only its being held as normative on religious doctrine and state-religion relations: ‘[Al-Ahbash] has the right to exist in Ethiopia but it is unacceptable that the Council [the EIASC] tries to impose it on all members of the Muslim community’.⁶⁷ But in polemical work of some of his co-religionists, like Ahmedin Jebel,⁶⁸ al-Ahbash was vehemently attacked on its Islamic identity.

The al-Ahbash episode and its ultimate failure are well-described in the literature.⁶⁹ The key point is that it backfired because Ethiopian Muslims, and notably the younger leadership, did not want to have one version of Islam imposed on them—they rejected it appealing to the legal right to be free of ‘state interference’ in religious affairs. Whether the Ethiopia state has or does not have the right to instruct religious leaders on constitutional-legal clauses and on civic issues—i.e. on the context and limits of both state and religious scope of action vis-à-vis each other, Art. 11.3 of the Constitution—is not easily decided and will not be further discussed here.⁷⁰ A problem here is the lack of clear additional legislation on the ‘secular order’.

As part of the same government campaign, there was the dismissal in December 2011 of 50 Arabic language teachers from Awoliya School and the replacement of its entire administration by government nominees. This event further encouraged demonstrations of the Muslim community, unfolding over 2012 and onwards. And in October 2012 the

⁶⁵Officially called the ‘Association of Islamic Charitable Projects’.

⁶⁶One of the few studies on the movement is A. Nizar Hamzeh and R. Hrair Dekmejian, ‘A Sufi Response to Political Islamism: Al Ahbash of Lebanon’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 28:2 (1996), pp. 217–229.

⁶⁷Cited in Aaron Maasho, ‘Ethiopian Muslims Protest Government Interference’, *Reuters news message*, 11 May 2012.

⁶⁸See Ahmedin Jebel, *Ahbash and Allah's Essence. A Response to their Confusion-Creating* (Addis Ababa: n.p., 2012 [in Amharic]).

⁶⁹See Mohammed Dejen, ‘Ethiopia’s *Ahbash* Path for Religious Moderation and Countering Extremism: Pitfalls and Discontents’, *Journal for the Study of Religions of Africa and Its Diaspora*, 28 (2017), pp. 110–124; Terje Østebø, ‘Salafism, State Politics, and the Question of “Extremism” in Ethiopia’, *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 8:1–2 (2014), pp. 171–172, and id., ‘Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia: from Containment to the Production of a “Governmental Islam”’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 81:4 (2013), pp. 1029–1060.

⁷⁰But in so far as religious life and activism touch upon the public (shared) sphere and may have an impact on civil rights (e.g. of women *within* the religious communities), they cannot be categorically beyond regulation. Religious freedom is not absolute. As far as we know, the *Ahbash* people did not intend to impose their (doctrinal, cultic) version of Islam on the Ethiopian Muslims.

government charged 29 Muslim protestors with ‘terrorism’ and ‘attempting to establish an Islamic state’. Another step in the campaign of warnings against Muslim radicalization was the screening in 2013 on Ethiopian state TV of a documentary called *Jihadawi Harakat*, on alleged terrorist and Islamist threats in Ethiopia. The film was a quite dubious product of suggestive editing, asserting the imminent danger of Islamist political radicalism and plans to install an Islamic state. It was alarmist and based on tenuous ‘evidence’ and half-truths. In addition, in 2015 a major section of Muslim leaders represented in the ‘Muslim Arbitration Committee’ (18 of the 22), were sentenced to long prison terms.⁷¹ While the Muslim protests petered out over 2015 due to repression and cooptation, again in January 2017 twenty Muslim activists were sentenced to prison, found guilty of ‘trying to establish a state ruled by Sharia law and inciting violence’ under Art.7(1) of Ethiopia’s harsh 2009 *Anti-Terrorism Proclamation* (Procl. Nr. 652/2009)⁷² and under criminal charges for violating articles 32(1) (a) and 38(1) of the *Penal Code* of 2004.

In all these matters the government overstated its case, because no clear evidence of terrorist activities or movements was available. It does not mean that among Ethiopian Muslims radical or extremist ideas and enmity toward other faiths were absent; only they did not lead to organizational-operational expression.⁷³ Religion-based violence was only visible in various local clashes between faith communities around concrete cases, such as new mosque or church building, burial site choice, excessive religious sound production, contested conversion efforts, or perceived ‘insults’ of the other faith’s religious scriptures.

In short, Muslim leaders in Ethiopia embraced the secular constitutional statute and expected its promise of mutual non-interference of state and religion to be honored: i.e. no ‘policing’ of the nature of their Muslim identity, be it Salafist-‘Wahhabist’ or ‘Sufist’. The mass demonstrations of Muslims in 2012–2014 against the state authorities and the discourse of protest by their leaders were framed with a strong appeal to the Constitution and its granting all religious groups freedom in community organization; Muslims should be granted autonomy, the right to choose their own leaders and organizations, have their own religious schools, media, etc. This was supported by the Muslim religious reformists around the Awoliya School as well as by what Østebø and Shemsedin⁷⁴ have termed the ‘Intellectualist’ group—Muslim professionals, teachers, students, urban-based traders, etc., with no ‘extremist’ agenda but rather a wish to see Muslim identity and concerns reflected or represented in the public debates on Ethiopia’s political order.

The Ethiopian case is interesting in comparative perspective: on the one hand, incidents of religious violence have not been scarce, and tension between the faith communities increased significantly, leading to competitive relations, identity politics and separation, with possibly negative consequences. The incidents in the post-1991 period (some of them clearly terrorist) thus testify to a subtext of religious antagonism. But large-scale religion-based violent movements, as in Somalia, Kenya⁷⁵ or Nigeria, have *not* lasted, and

⁷¹Four of the 17 were released on 14 February 2018.

⁷²See the text on: <https://chilot.me/2011/01/a-proclamation-on-anti-terrorism-proclamation-no-6522009> (accessed October 8, 2018). This law was rescinded in 2018, under the new prime minister Abiy Ahmed.

⁷³Except possibly some underground movements.

⁷⁴See: Terje Østebø and Walleign Shemsedin, ‘Ethiopian Muslims and the Discourse about Moderation’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 55:2 (2017), pp. 225–249.

⁷⁵Cf. Hassan Ndzovu, *op. cit.* (see note 48).

armed escalation along a path of imitative rivalry has not solidified. The Muslim protests of the past decade were consistent in appealing to the secular statute giving them autonomy, and did *not* develop violent contestation. They did not call for constitutional change and state overthrow. Things might change, however, if the Muslims would gain the demographic majority in the country. Several of my Muslim informants in Addis Ababa stated that when this would be the case, then, for instance, the statute of *shari'a* would have to be upgraded and expanded. What this would mean for the secular constitutional model is a moot point.

But so far, Muslim leaders in large majority have tried to maintain and rhetorically cultivate an accommodative stance. Terrorism is utterly rejected. In 2015, when ISIS adherents in chaotic Libya decapitated ca. 40 Orthodox Christian Ethiopian migrants, the Ethiopian Muslim Supreme Council leaders, supported by a majority of Muslims in the country, expressed their abhorrence.⁷⁶ In the *digital* domain, however, major religious rivalry is still enacted, and religious polemics as well as calls to radical reform and militant defense of the faith are rampant, showing clear signs of discursive extremism in certain sub-communities. This affects all major faith blocs (Protestants–Evangelicals, the Orthodox, and Muslims, with no doubt jihadist elements present) and keeps the subtext of tension alive, especially in the polemics on the *contents* of the other's faith (i.e. Christians vs. Muslims and vice versa, as well as *within* the faiths). This is a contentious issue because of the strong universalist 'truth claims' made; they are thus a classic example of the mimetic rivalry that Girard has identified, be it in the form not of actual but verbal warfare.

Jos, Nigeria: the deadlock of mimetic religious rivalry

Contrasting developments in Somalia and Ethiopia with the situation in the city of *Jos*, Nigeria, is instructive. Nigeria is a country divided almost equally between Christians and Muslims, but with highly contested religious fault lines and intense rivalries. In Jos, with over 1 million people, such militant communal-religious rivalry has taken over the city and totally redefined—read: blighted—the urban public domain.⁷⁷ The city has a slight majority of Christians (of various ethnic backgrounds) over Muslim inhabitants and lies in the border area between the predominantly Muslim North and the largely Christian South of Nigeria. Jos is the capital of Plateau State, which has a majority of Christians but is wedged into the Muslim majority states of the North. Although Nigeria has a secular constitution without a state religion and with state neutrality toward organized religious constituencies, the federal authorities in Abuja have over the years condoned the gradual installing of Islam as the official religion of the northern Nigerian states (provinces) and the introduction of Muslim *shari'a* as state law there. This contravened the federal constitution,⁷⁸ but was adopted (a) to appease northern Muslim elites, who saw it as a means to strengthen their power and whose federal loyalty might be bought with it, and (b) to give in to pressure from some sectors from

⁷⁶See: 'Ethiopian Muslims Dedicate Friday Prayers to ISIL Victims', <http://www.worldbulletin.net/haber/158255/ethiopian-muslims-dedicate-friday-prayers-to-isil-victims> (accessed May 13, 2015).

⁷⁷See Ulrika Trovalla, 'Competing Prayers: The Making of a Nigerian Urban Landscape', *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 38:3–4 (2015), pp. 302–313. Also: Jana Krause, *A Deadly Cycle: Ethno-Religious Conflict in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria* (Geneva: Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011), and id. 'Gender Dimensions of (Non)Violence in Communal Conflict: The Case of Jos, Nigeria', *Comparative Political Studies*, 52:10 (2019), pp. 1466–1499.

⁷⁸The 1999 Nigerian Constitution, Chapter 1, Art. 10, says: 'The Government of the Federation or a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion', www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ng/ng014en.pdf.

society to circumvent the slow and corrupt state justice system. In fact, the recent history of Nigeria is bloody especially in inter-communal relations, with enormous tensions existing between the faith communities, fought out in an atmosphere of perennial rivalry and alternative visions on what the Nigerian state should be.

The deep rivalries between the two communities in Jos have a material basis (inequality, resource rivalry, unemployment) but emerged partly in the shadow of this national controversy on the status of Islam and *shari'a* in law. In addition, issues of 'indigeneity' of ethnic populations and faith communities in the city (founded officially in 1915 around tin mining) have stimulated gradual extremist self-identification for political purposes and led to contagious, entrenched religious identities. No doubt the afore-mentioned issues of socio-economic inequality and 'resource competition' were in the background, not only in Jos itself but also in the surrounding rural areas, where (mostly Christian) farmers regularly clashed with (Muslim) cattle-herders.⁷⁹ But in fact it could be said that the extremist mindset was created *before* the actual violence started. Social relations in Jos, relatively amicable and business-like in the past, were slowly but surely restructured on the basis of religious identity and even became deeply territorially anchored (with no-go neighborhoods). Apparently, any moderating legal regulation failed in this case; the ambivalent and in fact faltering national policy engendered, or at least condoned, extremism to emerge in the city, making it a contested 'battlefield' in Nigerian religious politics. The militant self-identification, religious posturing and identity politics on both sides produced a pervasive politics of space and antagonism that urged the two communities to constantly vie for power and dominance. Road blocks, massive prayers gatherings congesting the streets, and deafening religious sound production from mosques and churches solidified the divisions and the competition. Religious polemics—arguments about even the 'validity' of religious doctrine—became vehement as well, and a subtext of discursive violence was thus instituted that entered local politics and converted into actual violence in moments of lapse or crisis. Ulrika Trovalla's disturbing study of this city⁸⁰ is exemplary in describing the process, demonstrating a mimetic rivalry that is self-propelling, destructive, and not contained by mediating state policy. Local authorities were indeed unable to address the violence, aggravated by a murderous attack on churches in Jos by the 'Boko Haram' movement in 2010. An extremist mentality was thus created and reproduced, space for dialogue and exchange became precarious, and differences were essentialized. Also, in this urban context of conflict and enemy-labeling, and with 'territorial' disputes at the order of the day, the absence of successful joint civic, let alone religious, dialogue to perform unity, reinforced a tendency of 'escalation into extremes',⁸¹ with numerous violent incidents, including 'silent killings'. Between August 2013 and December 2014 there finally was an initiative by the 'Humanitarian Dialogue Jos Forum' to establish peace between the communities, with a *Declaration of Commitment to Peace* signed by representatives of ethnic communities and women's delegations. But in May 2014 bomb attacks killed 118 people, and again, in December 2014 in another round, at least 30 people were killed in twin bombings. In 2015 a Jos Peace Dialogue Forum was installed to further try bridging the communal divides, despite continuing religious-communal

⁷⁹For example, in March 2010 attacks carried out by Fulani herdsmen in Dogo Na Hauwa, a village south of Jos, left more than 500 people dead. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/09/world/africa/09nigeria.html> (accessed July 11, 2015).

⁸⁰Trovalla, *op. cit.*

⁸¹See above, note 17.

agitation. Deadlock and a balance of fear between the religious communities have marked the urban space of Jos, despite emerging but fragile local initiatives to counter them. In the countryside near Jos mass violence spread, as in June 2018 with attacks of Fulani Muslims on Christian villagers, resulting in more than 200 people killed.

The Jos example shows the crucial role of state policy: it was absent, although its task would be to maintain or (re)set the terms of interaction and regulate religious life and communal conflicts as they arise. There is nothing ‘inevitable’ about religious rivalries being acted out and escalating into violence, rioting and terror. To some extent, this was shown by the Ethiopian example, where the, admittedly, repressive and exaggerated state policy towards Muslim revivalism and militancy (and several Christian polemical accusations) unjustly labeled the community as ‘extremist’ but still had the effect of dampening escalation, however controversial the process was.⁸² Interesting was that the ‘scapegoating’ approach of the Ethiopian state towards Muslims (cf. the row on the documentary film *Jihadawi Harakat*, above)—accusing them of an agenda of violence—even evoked criticism from Christians, supporting the Muslim cause.

Jos is a diverse city with multiple religious (sub-)communities, self-advertising as such. Neither took responsibility for good relations or interaction with any other community—it had to come from elsewhere. It would seem that the basic fact of religious pluralism in African countries and its durability necessitate the mediating intervention of constitutionally mandated state authorities to create a middle-ground of negotiation and accommodation, and of de-emphasizing religion as a politically relevant identity in the public sphere. African state authorities do not play this role well, due to autocratic approaches, divide-and-rule tactics, institutional weakness, opportunism, and lack of accountability. But still, the legal (constitutional) framework to pursue this middle ground is there, and might be elaborated with additional law-giving. In the case of Jos there was a glaring lack of state action; a lack which also led to ‘contagion’ and expansion of religion-based violence to other places in Nigeria.

Conclusion: the role of the political-legal regime vs. religious organization and violent mobilization

Religious extremism and violence are visible in Africa in the past two decades, evolved from historical domestic sources and inspired by new Islamist models from the Middle East and Asia. While issues of unequal access to ‘resources’, skewed distribution of public goods, and discriminatory practices always play a role in collectively mobilizing people, the role of ideology is ultimately crucial. When activated, it becomes primary, notably in Islamist resurgence, and when militarized or ‘securitized’, the ‘struggle’ is often seen in global, even cosmic, terms: against ‘fake’ Muslims (via *takfiri* labeling), against non-Muslims, and against the state authorities so as to usher in a kind of Islamist state or khalifate (which are, however, conceived in vague terms). The model has proven contagious and was adopted by scores of youths, minorities and social groups constructing their vulnerabilities and perceptions of neglect and victimhood into a discourse of militancy and intimidation that often turned ‘jihadist’. State policies and legal frameworks have often neither been able nor willing to connect to and incorporate these groups or to address their needs.

⁸²See the *US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2017 Annual Report* (Washington, DC, 2017), criticizing the heavy 2015 sentence against Muslim activists ‘... convicted of plotting to institute an Islamic government’, p. 198.

As we saw in the case studies, however, the local political culture and the nature of the legal regime make the big difference for contagious patterns of extremist and violent mobilization to occur. While in Somalia the Islamist armed militants of Al-Shabaab and allied clerics categorically rejected the emerging federal legal system and the idea of a constitution proclaimed by a ‘worldly’ or elected government, in Ethiopia Muslims across the board accepted and *appealed* to the 1995 Constitution that granted religious freedom and non-interference in religious affairs by the state. Their revolt in 2011–2015 was against the state not respecting these rights and blatantly interfering in the internal affairs of the organized Muslim community (in Addis Ababa especially) and in cultic matters. They did not develop a ‘political theology’ and did not take up arms—except in a few incidents—or go the road to terrorism, despite the government at one point reproaching them for wanting to install an Islamist state.

This difference between the two countries shows that the specifics of the local legal context, as well as the pattern of historical relations and inter-dependencies between Muslims and other groups in society, are of crucial importance—a development towards extremism and religiously-fueled violence is never inevitable. The demographic factor is also relevant: in Somalia: 99% is Muslim, and sectarian and clan-based differences became important; Ethiopia is 61% Christian and 34% Muslim, and the balance was precarious.⁸³ The third case—Jos, Nigeria—was the most antagonistic, with a 55–45% Islam vs. Christian divide, and here the issue of numerical dominance was very tense. But most importantly, there was also a weak observance of national law and juridical procedures by the Nigerian state authorities—and a resulting lack of popular trust in them. This was conducive to generating a mimetic cycle of rivalry and violent actions that is not easy to break.

In such cases—and for understanding the emergence and development of religious/terrorist violence in general—R. Girard’s theory shows great analytical value, showing what mechanisms are at play. The study of religiously inspired violence in Africa can be placed in a wider frame of study of violence and the sacred.⁸⁴ Once that cycle of violence is in place, notions of ‘purity’, ‘sacred values’ and ‘(self)sacrifice’ become the motivating factors in the perpetration of violent and terrorist acts against those framed as ‘opponents’, ‘enemies’ and ‘unbelievers’. This religiously-based violence, however, is not ‘sacrificial’. The deflectionary role of (sacrificial) violence via religious ritual (à la Girard) is usually absent under modern conditions, or is sometimes not applicable. The political-legal regime and the reach of the state hereby become of great importance.

But is there a ‘secular’ cure for religiously styled (extremist) violence of the kind discussed here, e.g. in Somalia’s or Nigeria’s case? Can presumably neutral law-giving and enforcement by the state, trying to push religious violence out of the public domain, regulate or domesticate it? In view of African peoples’ strong commitment to and socialization in religion as an ensemble of lived, embodied practices and as vessels of common identity and ultimate meaning, that is a challenge, especially if perceived grievances and identity concerns of religious communities are already politicized. But what can be done is to contest, and suppress if need be, all religious discourse/ideology aimed at denigrating, insulting or threatening *other* religious or non-religious or ethical communities, and to prohibit illegitimate acts of violence in any form. I.e. the political use of religion, being

⁸³The remaining 5% are traditional believers and others.

⁸⁴See M. Juergensmeyer, ed., *Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World* (London: Frank Cass, 1992).

a totalizing move threatening and/or scapegoating others, is better avoided. Engaging religiously-based extremism and terrorism as in a 'war' is probably incorrect, because it fuels a mimetic model and cycle that will be endless and goes beyond the law. The move of states resorting to an exclusive 'securitization' policy toward militant religious movements is usually counter-productive and does not solve the issues.⁸⁵

The analysis of the three case studies thus shows the risks of ambivalent *political structures* that insufficiently regulate and implement laws regarding religious life and communal politics in a pluralist society and that fail to assert the *primacy* of the political over the religious in the public-civic domain. This lack of action can lead to spiraling competition and mimetic rivalry, which then take on a (violent) dynamic of their own. Political choices made out of expediency by state authorities (like condoning sub-national authorities to declare Islamic law as state law, as in Nigeria, or privileging one religious/ethnic group or elite over another) often make room for ideologies of religious extremism to assert themselves. Such choices then also allow militants to follow up their ideological assumptions about in- and exclusion, purity, and supremacy with conversion into violent action, including terrorism. Once this cycle is set in motion it is not easily stopped.

The incontrovertible religious and cultural *pluralism* of African countries, including those where violent, religion-inspired or terrorist movements are active, invites a strengthening of and judicial institutions and law and of mediating frameworks of communal interaction, the creating or safeguarding of a public space that encompasses religious diversity and tensions. It might be argued that in fact there is no other choice than to strongly elaborate such more 'neutral', accommodating legal structures. The latter need not be dogmatically secular, in the sense of being 'anti' this or that religion, or banishing them from public presence and input, but should *mark* discursive political and legal space that could allow (religious) communities to interact and deliberate⁸⁶ about their differences to find shared underlying values and achieve workable compromise in quotidian social practice.

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⁸⁵See Anon, op. cit., p. 140: 'It seems that suffering lawless violence at the hands of agents of the state can become a crucial point of no return in radical acceptance of violence as necessary, redemptive, and unavoidable'.

⁸⁶And 'translate' their messages, cf. Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Space', *Philosophia Africana*, 8:2 (2005), p. 101.