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A Historical Survey Of Religious Tolerance, Co-Existence And Cultural Values In North Gondar Zone : Evidences From Chilga, Matama And Gondar City

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Abstract:

The study is about the evolution of indigenous Islam and Christianity in the study area. It deals with issues of syncretism other than religions in their 'pure' sense highlighting the local historical conditions within which indigenous values have achieved harmony, tolerance and co-existence that brought cohesion and unity among the communities in the study area. The objective of the study is to re-examine and investigate the inter-marriage of cultural values and world religions which gave birth to a new identity that proved the source of belongingness and family hood. Besides it is the objective of the study to call for its preservation for generation to come as an identity marker. Up on the bases of the data collected it is possible to argue that the dynamics between indigenous culture and world religions gave rise for the tolerant Islam and Christianity in the study area where Muslims and Christians have maintained their cultural bond of co-existence for several centuries. Saint veneration, baptism of holy water, holy men commemoration, magical practices, exorcising of 'evil's spirit possession, honoring the dead, praying at the 'sacred Tree' are components of the common values of the believers. Thus, an inter communal relation has been the cornerstone of co-existence than issues of religious differences and similarities.

Key words: Religious tolerance, Christianity, Islam, cultural values, syncretism, spirit possession

1.Introduction

Historically speaking, Ethiopia has been a nation endowed of religious culture of tolerance and co-existence between various religious followers for centuries¹. Religion in Ethiopia has been portrayed as pragmatic, tolerant, inclusive and syncretistic in many respects. Arguably such a picture reveals the inherent diversity and dynamics of religion in the country.²This dynamic nature is further demonstrated by social, cultural and economic issues. Begemdir-Semien province where the district of the current study focused has been known for religious co-existence. Religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam lived together for long with respect and tolerance. The area has been also the juncture of the major trade routes were inhabited by indigenous Muslims and some foreign mercantile groups dominantly monopolized trade in the midst of devoted religiously Christian kings and populace³.

This paper tends to shed light therefore, on religious co-existence and harmony exercised for years in the study area which has not yet thoroughly been studied and documented. It seeks to discuss the role of religion as a social and cultural force to compromise religious boundaries among believers mostly Orthodox Christianity and Islam.

We do have cultural evidences in different part of the study area which manifest understanding, co-existence and accommodation between believers of the two religions⁴. Christianity, Islam and elements of the pre-existing believe systems successfully fused new and old cultural elements⁵. This fusion has created shared identity and values and has promoted harmony and co-existence among the communities. It is this historic layer and dynamics which gave rise for the indigenous nature of Christianity and Islam in the study area that the researcher is interested to underscore⁶.

2.Geographical Information

Just to draw a glimpse of geographical information of the study area, the present day North Gondar the former Begemidir -Semien province is part of the northwest plateau and lowland environment of Ethiopia.⁷The topography of the region is characterized by rugged terrain with chains of high mountains and steep escarpments. Gondar Zuria, Matama, and Chilga districts are an integral part of such a physical environment. The region has a diverse geography in that it includes the rich agricultural plateau of Dembia, Chilga, the high peak of Semien, the Lake environment of Tana. The tributaries of the Abay river (Nile river) and those of Tekeze (Atbara) crosses and originate from the region.⁸ Some of the major rivers of the area includes: Angereb. Megech, Guang, Auaga,

shinfa, and Gandawaha. The lowland of Matama and Qura along the Sudanese border are also part of the area. The study area is located in the intersection of the northern highland and the western lowlands which proved to be one of the sites of the earliest Muslim-Christian interactions in Ethiopia. The presence of trade route crossing the area to Sudan and Ethiopian make the region melting vessel for various cultures. The establishment of towns such as Gondar, Enfranz, Gelediba Aykel, Negadie Bahir, Matama-Galabat reflects their location along trade routes and commercial centers.⁹

3. Brief Historical Overview

Both Christianity and Islam were imported religions for Ethiopians. In fact, Christianity preceded Islam nearly three centuries¹⁰. Christianity was first embraced by the kings and the dignitaries and royal families before it turned to the ordinary people in contrast to Christian expansion in the Roman Empire¹¹. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of the oldest Christianity witnesses in Africa and an official state religion in the country since 4th A. D to the revolution of 1974.¹² The first foothold of Islam in the country dated back to the 615 A.D, when the followers of the prophet sought an asylum against the injustice faced in their home land in exercising the new religion. The first converts outside of the prophet kin men and companion were considered to be Ethiopian: Ma'zin Bilal was a case in point. The practical effect was that the prophet himself declared Ethiopia to be free from the jihad which the Arabs by the early period of Islamic expansion had waged on the rest of the world.¹³ Be it as it may, Islam in Ethiopia developed an indigenous virtue of the culture of co-existence (inward orientation, exhibit the kind of privacy) and self competence that was likewise to Ethiopian Christianity.¹⁴

There is an evidence witnessing the role of clerics such as Sheikh Ali and the high priest of the Ethiopian orthodox church together mediated cases of political importance in the era of princes (1769-855). The quarrel was between a royal house husband and a wife Emperor Yohanes III and that of his wife etege or queen Manan. The delegate successfully accomplished its mission. The royal couple resumed their marriage life.¹⁵ Moreover, the couple reach in conclusion to resolve their political problem strongly respecting the dignitaries headed by the mentioned personalities from both religious camps in the town of Gondar.¹⁶ This is a clear indication of respect, co existence and cohesion of Muslims and Christians even in the royal court.

Travelers account of the also indicated the role played by Muslim clerics such as sheikh Ali Gondar who tried to bring together and negotiate doctrinal quarrels between Abune Selama and Ecage Mahsantu in 1844 among the priest hood. As such he was enjoying tremendous respect not only among the political elite but also among the Christian populace.¹⁷

As to our sources another exciting instance was also accomplished by the same personality sheik Ali in the study area to bring peace and order during the period of Zamana Masafint /era of princes (1769-1855)¹⁸. The issue attempted to be resolved was a political crisis among the notables of the time. The case in point was Kassa of Quara and Ras Ali II before Kassa's victory over Dejjach (commander of the gate) Goshu of Gojjam in 1852 at the battle of Guramba.¹⁹ The ecage (high priest in the Ethiopian orthodox church) and other Christian fathers went to Sheikh Ali and the kentiba (mayor) of the city upon the request of course one of the great combatant in the period, for mediation with his overlord, Ras Ali II. The Christian and Muslim clerics went to Gojjam where the Ras was camped at the time.²⁰ The ras (governor general) refused to make peace with Kassa and the mission ended in failure²¹. However, we can see the religious co-existence and dependable friendship of higher class clerics in both sides.

4. Determinants Of Religious Harmony And Co-Existence In The Study Area

4.1. Socio-Cultural Factors

The socio-cultural factors which genuinely entrenched for several centuries among the people of the region have existed intertwined. As informants noted, cross religious interactions, syncretism indigenizing religions played important role in maintaining co-existence and cohesion among followers.²² This is to say that the interaction, cultural trait, language, geography, way of life, feeding habits, marriage systems etc were and still are traced back to religions' early history, introduction and later dynamics. As such a number of Christian informants in the study area traced traditions that attest shared cultural practices with Muslims. They put situations as follows:

“Their grand fathers and mothers and even they themselves did in their life with their Muslim contemporaries though in another form said, it was usual that Muslim and Christian slaughter a goat or a sheep on the bases of their own religious principle and put on the assign or a rope of different colours on the flash or meat and boiled it in a similar pot then after boiled and prepared for meal time select their own on the bases of the sign or symbol put over at the beginning and prepared to eat”²³

This was a common experience particularly in Aykel town and Gondar city. Common religious culture, including pilgrimage, shrine, saints allowed Muslims and Christians to come together usually, respecting their separate identities within a system of mutual understanding and sometimes practicing together veneration. Muslims and Christians also accepted their differences in religion and developed mutual trust and belongingness. To this effect, Muslims and Christians in the study area carefully controlled their boundaries through cultural practices which includes morality.²⁴

To remark some of the huge values that Muslims regard Christians among others a person with righteous and honest for his or her mateb (religion) and never deceive. In line with this my Muslim informants goes on witnessing the respect and honour of their Christian neighbours by their words “የከርስተያን ልጅ አይደል ሀይማኖተኛ ነው ከቃሉ ዘነፍ አይልም” (Literary, he never shies away from his words, for he is a Christian) The term haymanotegna refers to honest, respect norms, confidential, follow in the strict form of the tradition and customs of the society abide everyone regardless of religion and also witness how devotee a person is for religious principles. Anyhow, informants underlined the term haymanotegna (moral life) seems to be sensed as being loyal to culture which

includes honesty , integrity , role modelling and devoted for the well being of the larger community . It therefore, refers to one who is governed by the society moral life.²⁵

Christians also noted their Muslim neighbours trust by symbolize them in such sense that “የእግዚር ሰዎች” to say that “people of God”. “God is always nearer to Muslims to receive their prayers”. As to the Christian tradition of the study area, Muslims have not been people of revenge at times of discomfort with their Christian neighbours or within themselves. They used to let the creator to judge and within days able to get blessings. Thus, Muslim and Christian friends usually exchanged blessings and good wish on the bases of their respective religion saying “ፀሎት እንረሳላ” (lit. Let's pray for each other .) They used to entertain the prayer or blessing as the blessing of the other. It has been common to hear conversations after completing certain task between close neighbours or friends of Muslims and Christians at the height of parting. This includes exchanging funny stories as “You Islam” and “Amhara”(connotation for Christiania's in the study area). It is only the sacrifice of animals and eating that meat which separate Muslims and Christians in their social congregation at times of sadness and happiness in the study area.²⁶

Informants believe that friendship and belongingness emerged by being together or living together for considerable time. Living together facilitated the formation of informal relations and interdependence of these which includes working, eating and drinking together. Informants overwhelmingly attested the significance of eating together for co-existence. Sharing food has particular significance in the study area context where Muslims and Christians have their own strict dietary laws particularly concerning meat and its preparation. Muslims and Christians invite each other for wedding , funerals, feasts and holydays by cooking separate meat and paying attention for each others ritual prohibitions , “having eaten and drunk together” is an indication of belongingness and family hood . The value of sharing food in the region not only has its social value but also a spiritual dimension . As the saying goes on in the study area. “ You do not bite the hand that has fed you.”²⁷ Both Muslims and Christians affirmed that their religious culture teaches tolerance and peaceful co-existence that they inherited from the founding fathers . Informants said that “peace is not imposed by the government, you learn civility and love for others from your parents and neighbours”. “የጎረቤት ህቅ” or “ጎረቤት ከፈን ጎዎ” literary a neighbour is everything and anything in life of some one²⁸. Besides, the institutions Edir (associations for help of member in bad times or else) and Iqub (savings association of people) are important. Christian Saint venerations such as Hidar Micheal , Sene Micheal , Ginbot Lideta , New year (kidis yohannis) etc were and still are common holydays completed with sacrifice by Muslims . It is also usual to see boiled beans and wheat prepared by Muslims, Thursday the eve of Christian Easter የ ፀሎት ሐሙስ (literary, prayer Thursday, eve of Easter in Ethiopia)²⁹

There has been special thought of Muslims by the Christians as we have seen above earlier. Christians witnessed the value of honesty, confidentiality resides among Muslims³⁰. Thus, they used to preserve or save their various high quality endowments including money without any observer or testimony in the house of their Muslim friends.

4.2.The Institution Of የ ስት ልጅ/Breast Daughter Or Son/

The institution of የ ስት ልጅ breast daughter or son in the study area is another unique feature performed for centuries between Muslims and Christians to pronounce their love to continue and sustain their relation . It is all about relation called yeqalkidan zemdina (Lit. An oath in the name of God not to betray a friend or a neighbour not related in blood) The process has been included considering the child of a friend as a daughter or son to show the love he has or she has for the family of the adopted child. It is far reaching social and cultural implication for the local people as informants noted. Such institution usually seems to be purely Christian tradition .³¹ The most important is relationship and family hood , as such people of with such link are not missed each other at times of happiness and sadness as blood relation even beyond that since it is a relation of kalkidan (lit. An oath in the name of God) for generations .³² Here, below the researcher has a case study:

Emahoy(respected title before name usually given woman devoted to God's or spirituality) Radu Bizuneh (85 years old) woman witnessed her valuable experience and life history to understand wisely this institution and goes as follows : As said her age is 85 years old by now , Emahoy Radu tells the story that she had “የ ስት እናት” (“breast mother”) of Islamic faith by the name Hawa Abdu in Awarada village , Chilga warada , who take care of her since her child hood besides her mother and her father . Having countless number of cattle herds , and a number of beehive in the compound of her mother and father , she still remember the gifts offered and the love she have had with her yetutenat .She almost nearer to tear of remembering the whole thing that she had with her second mother .She never forget the macha (gift for marriage) by her yetuti enat(breast mother). emahoy Radu further noted that she has strong link with forbears of her tuti enat still on³³.

4.3.Shrines And Holy Water

The Saints or literary the “ fathers” awlya (holy men) venerated at these shrines are believed to be founders and protectors of the country , the community and the state . The Saints here are venerated for illness , rain failure , family problem ,fertility, property , or to gain blessing . Both Muslims and Christians go to the shrine when there is a crisis or at regular time of celebration. In various parts of the region there are Holy Waters (tsebel) where all come for healing of their illness regardless of their religion.³⁴

Frequenting shrine at times proved important aspect of Islam in the region . One can see a number of shrine places even in the historic city of Gondar alone. To mention some of the most remarkable shrine places including Basha sheriff ,sheikh Ansar ,Mushira dingay and shiekh Ali. The prayers objective was to safe guard the city and the rural large from failing disaster. Informants also underlined that if the rainy season refrain or not appear at the usual time , the Muslims started prayer and joined by Christians for the well being of the general community and the environment.³⁵

The most famous of all shrines, however, is that of Sheikh Ali's shrine. Sheikh Ali Gondar performed various religious activities in Gondar such as prayers, teaching the faith, mediations of political issues of regional lords with the royal house in Gondar and mediating high religious father of the Ethiopian Orthodox church even during religious controversy within Ethiopian Orthodox Church of his time. He believed to have buried where he used to hold his solat (prayers). When he died the ecape (the high priest) of the Ethiopian orthodox church gave his witness to the good deeds of the sheikh and his holiness. The celebration of his Mewlid (birthday) is held in the month of Yekatit /month of February /by both Muslims and Christians. The two religious group usually contribute money to buy oxen and sheep for the feast.³⁶

Another shrines place found in the town of Gondar is Sheikh Abadir (founder of shine of Abadir in eastern Ethiopia). Every year in Easter day both religious groups hold their prayers and offerings. The sheikhs believed to have come from Yeju and settled there. There is also a tradition that sheikh Abadir of Harar blessed the area for pilgrimage in Gondar than traveling to Harar, for blessing of sheikh Abadir. The Sheikh told for pilgrims from Harar came from Gondar that they could find a stick on the place where the present shrine flourished then returnee from Harar found the stick over the said place. Since that time on the shrine established. On Easter day some Christians and Muslims frequented the shrine. But the selection of Easter day is not clear, seems to be the sign of co-existence and understanding, togetherness.³⁷

There are also other shrines in various parts of the study area such as Hajj Oumer Gie (the place of Hajji Oumer) near to Eyaho Mariam church, sheikh Nur nearer to Awarada Mariam church and sheikh Hassan sherif of Daza, the shrine of sheikh Asebela with its holy water frequented by both religious followers and sheikh Ginbaru in Armachiho near to the west of Chilga warada.

The most astonishing shrine and prominent still comprehend people of both believers including higher religious dignitaries is that of sheikh Wodi Arbab in Matama warada (Matama Yohannes) where both Muslims and Christians put thing like stick, needle, nail, wood markers around the tomb shrine of Sheikh Wodi Arbab for their neder or silet /promise in lieu of some thing they are concerned with/. They present a gift after their supposed prayer is answered. The representation of those materials mention ranged from the sheikhs blessings such as fertility, health, stolen materials, avenging a person, to get revelation and blessing in either party favors.³⁸

The shrine of Sheikh Abdul Basit in Azezo, the outskirt of the city of Gondar has been a prominent place of veneration. The mewlid /birth day /for the Sheikh is commemorated on Tuesdays annually after It is found very close to Lossa Mariam Church in Azezo where people of various areas and religions used both the church and the sheikh's holy waters for healings purposes.³⁹

4.4. Holy Water

Both believers for curing themselves from various health problems frequented holy waters in various parts of the study area. One can find various Muslims as equal as Christians healing themselves in the holy waters under the supervision of the church or monasteries. A case in point is Bata Mariam (Saint Marry church) in Gondar city. The researcher encounter a number of Muslims coming there see themselves healed from various physical and psychological problems. There are also Muslims who frequented Arsema Mariam (Saint Arsema monastery) which is found in Quara warada/district /in the neighborhood of Chilga near to Negade bahir /resting place of traders/along Ethio-Sudanese border.⁴⁰ The Monastery has holy water which indiscriminately opened to both believers. It is also one of the renown monastery in the study area where only Christians visited for "purring" themselves from worldly deed. Arama Gebriel church hot spring in Shawra warada also another prominent area of congregation where Muslims and Christians indiscriminately flock to cure themselves.⁴¹

The case in Azezo Sheikh Abdul Basit spring which believed to have innovated by his holiness spear dropped on a stony land cured various peoples suffered in eye illness and stomach ache and intestinal disease.⁴²

In this case my informant of the area who grown up to the age of 50(fifty) told me the detail of his experiences on that holy water.⁴³ Below is his life history in relation to the holy water.

My name is Terefe Aschalew. I'm about 55 years of age. I'm part of the family lineage of king Fasilades, at the eleventh lineage of his family. When I was a child I used to suffer from diseases like stomachache and intestinal diseases. My parents tried and devised different mechanisms to get me healed, but they were to no avail. After this my mother went to the shrine of sheikh Abdel Basit and brought me eminet(sacred soil)and holy water. Then she made me to take. Fortunately I become cured from my sufferings. My mane even coined from this event, Terefe (thus death spared him). Now I pay homage and respect to the sheikh to what he had done for me, though devoted Christian I'm.

4.5. Economic Factors

Under this factor we see economic interdependence which some times and in most cases intervene with political matters at times. Muslims have specialized in commerce in the long history of the study area. This had put them in a special place in the political economy of the country. The Sirara Negadie (carravan) traders were the prominent. The Jabarti were the major historic traders in the region. Agriculture is also another occupation in the study area predominantly practiced by non Muslim populations. Historically, Christians had many other opportunities in which Muslims have rarely been engaged includes: farming, recruiting in the army, the court and the legal system. Some sources noted that commerce as an occupation was secondary importance for the Christians, but it needs further research on that view since commerce played pivotal role in maximizing state revenue which includes import export goods and determining the existence and disappearance of a state through out history.⁴⁶

That is why similar sources attest that communities which monopolized commerce remained back bone for the very survival of the Ethiopian state.

“የ ምንድን በርበሬ የ ምንድን ሰጠክ
ዳር አገር ሂድኛ ሰምእኛ ቀንድ አምጣ”⁴⁷

Literary: Why green paper and spice of local origin

Please travel to the border not yet exploited and bring high valued commodities such as horn Ivory, wax and horns of special animals. The verse is an indication of crossing long distance to the border to bring valuable commodities for local and international market conception

Some of the lucrative commodities exported from North Western Ethiopia including the study area consists of items like gold , ivory , civet cat , wax, rohozori horn , honey, ginger, pepper , coffee , spice were enjoyed by Muslim merchants . But , it should be bear in mind that they were enjoyed close supervision and security issues from Christian elites . It is clear that the study area predominated by Christians both in towns and rural areas . One can find muslims in towns and a long trade routes heading to Matama and Massawa including Enfranz ,Maksegnit , Gondar , Chilga (Aykel) , Negadie Bahir , Gendawa ,Matama , Dabat , Jan Amora (Islamgie).Most of the Muslims in the towns were wealthy merchant and of course there were sizable number of Muslims engaged in artisan ship which most of the time consumed by Christian public and Muslims themselves. The following are some of the commodities brought to home from the coast includes: cotton and silk clothes of different colors, ornaments, black pepper, and other spices, utensils, metal water bottle or commodity from foreign land (yebahir eqa) knife , sickles, safety pins, corrugated iron sheets, shawls, cloth, bales, kerosene, needles, and ,and mirrors. The salt bar(amole) was an important commodity for dual purposes currency and consumption in the first half of the 20th c trade at least at home. ⁴⁸

Here the City of Gondar served as a launching pad for import as well as export commodities. Thus the city of Gondar remained to be a nucleus in commerce thanks to its location. Muslims were also appointed by Christian elites in the center as collectors of custom due at important trading posts. The Nagadras/head merchants/title was usually given to Muslims since the Muslims were the principal traders throughout the Ethiopian empire particularly in the study area. It was among them that regional and national rulers /Emperors/ recruited commercial agents and diplomatic leaders on behalf of the country. This shows how local Muslims trusted by the Christian rulers. The Negadras (head of merchants) had sizable power and appointed directly by the Emperor. This includes organizing caravan, collecting taxes in market towns arbitrating in civil cases while passing on criminal cases to the Ras (the governor) The Negadras in Gondar also since the beginning of this century acted as chief of the postal service between Addis Ababa , Gondar and Matama (Gelabat) . Furthermore, he also served as a guide ,and purchaser horses for travelers and masters of expedition. ⁴⁹

The Christian local officials, the military and the clergy approached the Muslim merchants to bring them luxurious imported commodities from the coast, Matama and Messawa. Muslims needed the Christian elite in turn to maintain peace and order in the market places trade route and caravan stops. Muslims also needed the Christian farmers surrounded the town in which they reside in order to supply them with agricultural produces. Muslims exchanged imported goods and locally produced woven clothes for agricultural produces of farmers. Thus, the Christians and Muslims established good economic relation. They tolerated in all ways of endeavor having maintaining religious boundaries. Christians and Muslims participated in voluntary celebration of each others festivals. Muslims presented gifts of imported items to their Christians friends and the ruling elites during the Ethiopian New year, charismas and Easter etc. Christians provided gifts such as Honey, Butter, sheep, goat and agriculture produce like grain and cereals to their Muslim friends during Idel al Adaha, Idal Fitir,and Mewlid. In this way the Christians and the Muslims of the region exchanged mutual gifts in the form of love and respect. As such Muslim and Christians are distinct only by religion. They maintained the general customs and traditions indigenous to their country and ancestry. The Christian elite did not perceive Muslims as a threat to the social and economic bases of the society. ⁵⁰

5.Conclusion

The study is a witness of intermarriage of religion, culture and values born either from the religions themselves or from the way of life of the people inherited from earlier generations in the study area.

Though, much has been said on the religious co-existence and understanding among religious followers in Ethiopia in general, the researcher argues that the general notion should be challenged in a sense that needs scientific research to historicize and contextualize at local levels. This as to the researcher should be acknowledged by emphasizing the issue of religious co-existence and its dynamism. It is therefore, to this response that the researcher tried to look into the change and continuity of religious perceptions ,cross boundaries and area of convergence .The study area is thus found to be a place of religious co-existence and junction displaying marked tolerance of differences.

The investigation identified the presence of age old belongingness and respect between followers of Christianity and Islam in the study area. It has been a result of long fusion and encounter and sharing of values among the believers of the study area.

6.Notes

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