

# Religion and Development: Indigenous Spirituality and the Preservation of Cultural Heritage in Tigray

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## 1. Introduction - Religion and Development

During much of the twentieth century, political meta-narratives such as Communism, Capitalism and Nationalism dominated the world stage. Gradually they were undermined by counter-discourses. It has been said that: "Marxism was defeated by ethnic conflict, which unleashed ethnicity, exposing the hollowness of the liberal promise. Paradoxically, the post-communist world is being united by 'free enterprise' and torn apart by race and religion."<sup>1</sup> Such processes are evident in Ethiopia, a country with more than 80 different ethnic and religious communities. After 1991 a radical constitution was introduced, giving every ethnic group the right of secession. Yet opposition groups claim that it is only meant for foreign consumption and that the one thing, which remains the same is that politics is run from the centre with a top down control.<sup>2</sup>

Community, citizenship, civil society, 'socially responsible business' are the new buzz words, but the concepts they express are fussy. It is evident that the "the old political culture of intolerance, must be replaced with a new political culture of tolerance, an effective means of accommodating the views of ... adversaries."<sup>3</sup> Ethical concepts are related to religion, which in the past furnished the ideology for state formation. Clearly, the old hegemonic concepts are outdated; however, intellectuals insist that survival requires a return to tradition. In a time of religious revitalization, it seems unwise to disregard the contribution that spirituality can make to national reconstruction.

1 A. Papermac, *The World After Communism, A Polemic for Our Times*, Macmillan London 1995, p. 166. There is a strong parallel with Barber 's (1992) concepts of 'tribalism and Globalism' i.e the McWorld of Homogenizing globalization versus the Jihad world of particularizing 'lebanisation'. See also R. Robertson *Glocalization, Time -Space and Homogeneity - Heterogeneity*, p. 33.

2 Kjetil Tronvoll, *Ethiopia a New Start. Minority Rights International Report*. London 2000, p. 80.

3 A. Papermac, *The World After...* op. cit., p. 160 and 166.

Ethiopian philosophers such as Kebede and Serequeberhan stress the importance of a return to tradition for survival. “Modernity is essentially the manner in which traditional values and beliefs endeavour to survive the challenges of science, nationalism, and internal social conflicts... Wherever social erosion is at work resulting in the loss of identity, underdevelopment takes firm hold. .... Survival was for Ethiopia a mission inscribed in its fundamental beliefs... the history of Ethiopia has been mainly a religious venture from the start.”<sup>4</sup> Serequeberhan relates spiritual to philosophic thought: Religion and African philosophic traditions are linked by their activity in the gap between actuality and ideality, in the exigencies of the struggle, promoting hermeneutic reflections. They explore the concrete processes by which the being i.e., the freedom of African existence (its historicity) can be reclaimed and established anew, fulfilling the emancipatory hopes and aspirations inscribed in a ‘common history’, tradition and universal discourse’.<sup>5</sup>

The dynamic processes outlined above require a creative ‘re-accentuation’ of tradition to discover new hidden meanings. The philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin showed how discourse could be ‘re-accentuated’ to discover hidden meanings of ancient dialogues. He outlined the inherently interactive – dialogic – nature of discourse and consciousness, which accounts for the constant generation of meaning. “There is neither a first nor a last word and no limits to the dialogical context ... even past meanings can never be stable (finalised ended) they will always change (be renewed) ... in the process of subsequent future development of dialogue. Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival”.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, this could be interpreted as promoting intercultural communication, which facilitates reinterpreting indigenous cosmologies in ways making them relevant to current issues. This entails an ‘ideological decolonization’, involving finding a ‘negotiable middle way’ between indigenous tradition’ and ‘Western’ ideas of development.

Experts such as Prof. Gerrie Ter Haar of Amsterdam University have worked out the relevance and rational of including religion in the development debate, despite its negative media image. The majority of people in developing countries are religious, and do not consider religion as merely ‘*zingeving*’ (giving personal meaning to life) as in the West. On the contrary, they regard spiritual power as potentially improving their quality of life, and directly influencing their daily life. Religion constitutes a social and political reality, a powerful source of motivation causing people to act as they do and change the world for the better. Religion is part of the social fabric and the way in which people voluntarily choose to associate themselves. The most important reason for involving religion in the development debate is the need to maximalise the resources for development. It is

4 M. Kebede, *Survival and Modernisation Ethiopia’s Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse*, Red Sea Press, Lawrenceville and Asmara 1999, p. xv –xvi.

5 T. Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy, Horizon and Discourse*, Routledge, New York and London: 1994.

6 M. Gardiner, *The Dialogics of Critique. M.M. Bakhtin and the Theory of Ideology*, Routledge London and New York 1992, p. 195, see also M. M. Bakhtin 1986, p. 70.

widely accepted that movements for development should be built on people's own resources i.e., inclusive of religious resources.<sup>7</sup>

In certain countries such as the Netherlands, there has been a debate about 'developments moral appeal or 'belief in development', which is seen as: "ultimately a *quasi-religious* view on the ways in which societies and cultures must go forward, ... Loss of transcendence in the discourse of developers gives this discourse a quasi-religious quality: as if, salvation has to be achieved along secular ways, in particular along the ways of the 'global market'. In this era of accelerated globalisation, the relation between religion and development has become a hot topic. (This presentation agrees with) Amartya Sen's view of development as the expansion of human capabilities."<sup>8</sup> Religion is seen as a means of enhancing this development. Within Christian Orthodoxy the dominant religious tradition in the Tigrinya context, the Church is seen as that which brings the whole of humanity and creation to '*theosis*' i.e., to sanctification, transformation and deification. Religious movements are called to provide the moral guidance and emotional motivation, which can humanize the process of globalization, and make it into something, which genuinely promotes human well being.

## 2. Globalisation, Glocalisation, Indigenous Narratives and the Ecumenical Imperative

The phenomenon of globalization is connected with rethinking the relationship of time-space, as recent innovations in technology and economics overturn the former links between temporal and spatial dimensions of human life. The debate over homogenization versus heterogenisation has formerly dominated theories of globalization; however, according to recent thinking this should be transcended. These processes are now seen to be mutually implicative, resulting in calculated attempts to combine homogeneity with heterogeneity and universalism with particularism. Religious renewal is often a reaction to the transformative and dislocating effects of globalization, involving a redefinition of social and cultural ideals. Theorizing agency and subjectivity are stimulated as individual lives react to structural instabilities and uncertainties. Globalization cannot be seen as a single unified phenomenon, but rather as a 'syndrome' of processes and activities. Integral to the 'globalization syndrome' are interactions among the global divisions of labor and power, the new regionalism, and resistance politics, which stand out

7 Prof. H. Ter Haar, "Relevance and Rationality of Religion in the Development Debate." - *International Development Studies University of Amsterdam Lecture II*. Amsterdam October 15, 2005.

8 A. Van Harskamp, "Introduction" in: *The Development of Religion, The Religion of Development*, Edited A. Kumar Giri, A. Van Harskamp, O. Salemink, Eburon Delft 2004, p. 1-9, especially, p. 2-3.

as central in world order. Alternatively, globalization can be regarded as a domain of knowledge, facilitating analysis of integrating and disintegrating processes, which give insight into the way the world is structured.<sup>9</sup>

There is a tendency for members of the educated elite in developing countries to interpret religious concepts in an empiricist, modernist way, leading to closed religious systems and fundamentalism. This results in tendencies towards religious hegemony, with inherent distorted and impoverished views of the world. Self-justifying arguments form an increasingly harsh, inflexible and impenetrable network, influencing the collective subconscious. Such approaches disregard the property of condensation of meaning, and multi-vocality, inherent in religious symbols, which stimulate different types of interaction. The complexity and uncertainty of the meaning of symbols is their strength. Religious activities as ritual performances establish and reinforce status and identity, fulfilling specific social roles. Anthropologists see religious ritual as a form of communicative and constructive activity. It can be a way of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way that things are. Ritual acts can be seen as indexes, symbols with conventional relationship to their referents. Consequently, in order to discover the liberating potential in a religious tradition it is necessary to engage in a dialogue with it.

Contextual reflexive engagement with religious tradition embodies an aspect of glocalisation: i.e making the global local. Glocalisation can also be described as the interaction of the local and global, whereby detachment allows for transcending the boundaries of one's culture or locale.<sup>10</sup> It can be seen as a type of intellectual micromarketing of ideas, including the invention of traditions, which facilitate achieving certain goals.

It is important to engage religious tradition with problematic areas of public life, in such a way that it supports the dynamic of development and national reconstruction. This requires firstly investigating areas of indigenous spirituality and religious practice, and then engaging in a dialogue with them in such a way that they further specific aims. In effect, this means that the two discourses of development and religious revitalization are deconstructed and recreated in a new synthesis. There is a tendency to perceive of development as a Western hegemonic monologue opposed to local ideas, while the discourse of religious revitalization is often seen as having a fundamentalist xenophobic aspect. By reformulating an indigenous discourse of development, the positive energy of religious revitalization can contribute to the task of national reconstruction, rather than undermining it.

The first step involves comprehending the underlying cultural codes operative in the religious milieu in order to analyze the creation of knowledge traditions. Through transactions over knowledge, it is possible to regard knowledge as a good

9 J. M. Mittelman, *The Globalization Syndrome. Transformation and Resistance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2000, p. 4-6.

10 V. Roudemotof: "Transnationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Globalisation," in: *Current Sociology* 53:1 Jan, 2005, p. 113-135.

that is managed and husbanded by social actors.<sup>11</sup> This reflects a shift to a post-structuralist way of thinking, one concerned with power and discipline and the way that religious subjects (practitioners) are formed.

One of the problems with using religious narrative is its tendency to be absolutist and contradictory towards other narratives. Each religious community has its own 'indigenous discourse' in which it identifies itself as the most 'aboriginal' or the possessor of the greatest legitimacy in local affairs. Ethiopian Orthodoxy is based on a cultural matrix, which fused a considerable body of local religious culture with Judeo-Christian ideas. Orthodoxy is seen as functioning as the guardian of a specific Christian identity throughout the ages. Foreign invasions including the recent incursions of globalization are seen as attempts to eradicate this special identity. Western colonizers, wolves in sheep's clothes feign support for development, when they actually aim at undermining Ethiopian identity.<sup>12</sup>

The Ethiopian Catholic Church has an alternative discourse, based on preserving the 'original ancient Ethiopian teaching', which was falsified through Coptic influence resulting in Ethiopian isolation from World Christendom.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Protestants and Pentecostals assert that they preserve the 'pure Gospel' of the Early Church. Ethiopian Islam insists that the king of Ethiopia, who gave refuge to the persecuted followers of Mohammed, secretly converted to Islam giving Islam the status of legitimate state religion. Adherents of revitalized animistic movements (such as Oromo and Gurage spirit cults based on traditions of oral literature) regard themselves as the most original and indigenous religious traditions. In the midst of globalization, what persists is the strengthening rather than weakening of attitudes towards territorialized origins and autochthonous attachments. These articulate themselves in 'roots narratives' aligning identity with localities of birth and reinforcing particular modernities of blood and nationhood.

An unfortunate by-product of the globalisation's social and spacio-temporal reorganization is the clash of discourses of territoriality. This expresses itself most dramatically in the Orthodox discourse of canonic territory, which has been the cause of numerous incidents of inter-religious violence in Ethiopia. An enormous amount of energy is dissipated in polemic against other religious groups. This obviously undermines the ability of religious discourse to contribute to national reconstruction. There is consequently an ecumenical (inter-religious) imperative to promote the idea that the different cosmologies and spiritualities could complement

11 H. Aspen, *Amhara Traditions of Knowledge, Spirit Mediums and their Clients*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2001, p. 4.

12 Shortened translation from "Orthodox Identity", Deacon Dejaney Sheferaw, *Hamer Ze Orthodoxos Tewabedo Magazine*, 6:4, (1998), p. 21-23.

13 This is expressed most clearly in the writings of *abba Ayele Tekle Haymanot*, compiled in: Dr. Abba Ayele Teklehayamnot, *Miscellanea Ethiopica, Ethiopian Review of Cultures* 3, Desktop Publishing Senait Worku Addis Ababa 1998. Recently there has been a less polemic orientation in Catholic scholarship as exemplified by Paulos Berga's *What Happened to the Original Christian Unity in Ethiopia? Towards the Restoration of Our Original Unity in Christ*. EOS Verlag Sankt Ottilien, Munich 2006.

rather than contradicting each other. Each religious community has a different recipe of glocalisation, with different approaches to combining the global and local. In some cases this is undergoing rapid change, as in the case of Islam. The traditional tribal, syncretistic, tolerant Ethiopian Islam, is being replaced by a more strident, political and international Islamic discourse. Articulating the issue of the interrelationship of the different religious communities is an essential step towards involving them in the dynamic of national reconstruction.

### 3. Establishing an Agenda for Using Spirituality as a Resource for Development

It is important to designate specific areas of possible involvement of spirituality in the development discourse. This could take different forms, in this article, three broad areas are proposed: These include firstly ecology, secondly spirituality as building block of civil society, and thirdly the custodianship of cultural heritage. The third is the focus of this article.

In 1967 Lynn White Jr. wrote in the prestigious *Journal of Science*: “What people do about their ecology – human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny that is by religion. Normal Science and technology are not going to get us out of our present ecological crisis. We need a new religion or to rethink the old one.”<sup>14</sup> The end of the twentieth century ended the dream that technology could overcome nature. Approaches such as ‘Anthropology and environment’ seek to coordinate a discipline wide collaborative effort, with a commitment to holism, ... to join forces with indigenous people’s to explain the utility of traditional environmental knowledge.<sup>15</sup> This is linked with ‘Spiritual ecology’, the complex and diverse arena of spiritual, emotional and practical activities, at the interface of religion and environment. A related field is Environmental Archaeology, which is concerned with the totality of the human past, on a worldwide scale. It seeks to contribute to concepts and principles applicable to contemporary environmental issues.

The relation between globalization, spirituality and the environment is well expressed in the distinction between ‘ecosystems people’ and ‘biosphere people’. Ecosystem people live within a single (or adjacent) eco-system(s), of a traditional non-industrial or alternative nature. Biosphere people are tied to ‘global technological systems’ and inclined to indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources. There is a need to “move on from a terminal Cenozoic to an emerging Ecozoic Era in the

14 Lyn White, “Worldview: Environment, Culture and Religion” in: *Journal of Science* 1997.

15 C.L. Crumley, with R. E. Van Deventer and J. S. Fletcher (editors) *New Directions in Anthropology and Environment: Intersections*, Altmira – division of Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc. New York and Oxford 2001.

story of the planet Earth.”<sup>16</sup> Spirituality could be a way of restoring the sense of relationship and responsibility among ‘biosphere people’. “Given the way in which the environment is culturally defined, it is possible to think of envisaging a society, in which concern for the environment is strongly held, but in which agents other than human beings are seen as responsible for its protection; ancestor spirits, divine beings.” Religion is part of Culture, which acts as a mediator between man and his environment, in order to ensure its security.<sup>17</sup>

Ethiopia in general and Tigray in particular face an ecological crisis of enormous proportions. While some use has been made of religious facilities in ecological programmes (especially reforestation), little attempt has been made to develop an indigenous ecological theology. Ethiopian monastic spirituality attaches great importance to the environment and has an unexploited potential in this regard. Recently an example was set by His All Holiness Bartholomew I, the leader of the world’s 300 million Byzantine Orthodox Christians, who has become known as the ‘green patriarch’. He unhesitatingly described despoiling of the natural world as a “sin,” saying; “excessive consumption may be understood from a worldview of estrangement from self, from land, from life and from God.” Paul Gorman, executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment stated: “That the litany of environmental degradation under the rubric of sin was the first time a significant religious leader has so explicitly designated crimes against creation as a sin.” Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club remarked that; ‘environmentalists have made a profound error in failing to understand the mission of religion in preserving creation.’<sup>18</sup> Organizations such as the Europäischen Christlichen Umweltnetzenwerkes (ECEN)<sup>19</sup>, and publications such as the Geneva based *Ecco Theology The Journal of Religion, Nature and the Environment*, and *Junge Kirche unterwegs für Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und Bewahrung der Schöpfung*, have been lobbying for attention to the interface of spirituality and ecology.<sup>20</sup> Let us hope that this issue will receive more attention in the Tigrayan context.

The significance of civil society has increased since the definition of development shifted from a focus on economic growth to human development. Most African states engage in the self-defeating quest to survive by accomplishing hegemony

16 Thomas Berry. Herman Greene and friends, “A Call for the Ecozoic” in: *EarthLight* #28, Winter 1997-8, p 12-13

17 K. Milton, *Environmental and Cultural Theory. Exploring the Role of Anthropology in Environmental Discourse*. Routledge, London New York 1996, p. 33, and 39.

18 Editor, “Green Orthodox Patriarch Creates Waves with Watershed Pronouncement” – Earth News Section, in: *Earthlight* #28, Winter 1997-8, p. 4.

19 It was founded after the European ecumenical gathering in Graz 1997, and had its 5<sup>th</sup> ‘Vollversammlung’ in May 2005 in Basel, with over 130 Delegates from more than 25 countries: Internet site [www.ecen.org](http://www.ecen.org).

20 See for example: Stefan Weiss, “Bewahrung der Schöpfung praktisch und institutionalisiert, Ökologie-Bewegung und Umweltarbeit in den Evangelischen Landeskirchen” in: *Junge Kirche unterwegs für Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und Bewahrung der Schöpfung*, 11.1 March 2006, p. 6-10. For an African perspective see: E. M. Conradie, *An Ecological Anthropology. At home on Earth?* Ashgate Hants et al.: 2005.

over the society, rather than by being concerned with what societies really want. There tends to be a problem of the legitimacy of the state, and in particular, there is doubt as to how to achieve a type of state commensurate with the predominant values that societies embody.<sup>21</sup> Revolutionary Ethiopia typified the phenomenon of powerful African elites contributing to poverty, by lopsided economic priorities and neglect of traditional knowledge. In the post communist context, spiritual organizations have a particular opportunity to play a role in attaining balanced and integrated development by tapping the rich ideas of solidarity and mutual understanding rooted in local heritage. For example, monasteries could become centres of altruistic, low technology development and recuperate some of their traditional roles of caring for the destitute, orphans and the underprivileged.

African history is littered with postures at reforming with grandiose promises and conspicuous lack of delivery by governments. Where the attempts have been genuine but failed invariably, one ingredient is missing—the involvement of civil society. The notion that the states activities exist in a vacuum simply does not stand up to experience. Every individual builds a unique store of ‘social capital’ through personal relationships and networks—family ties, school friendships, workplace connections, and the like. In addition, the acquisition and expenditure of social capital means that individuals do not, and to some extent cannot, act independently, nor do they act wholly selfishly. In a decentralization approach, the many civil society actors—public and private, national, regional, and local, secular and religious – become the agents of change. Civil society’s involvement in local affairs stimulates the development of local leadership and encourages civil involvement. It constitutes an integral part of any effort to revitalize a national integrity system.”<sup>22</sup> The involvement of major religious communities has been a feature of anti corruption campaigns in Ethiopia. However, civil society is often regarded as a counter-power, and paralysed to insignificance. State power suffocates the actors for whom development is a rightful agenda, making them into quiet victims. On the international level being a recipient of never ending aid, reduces needy countries such as Ethiopia to the status of a dependent non-entity, reinforcing domination where partnership was needed

At the The Second OAU Civil Society Conference Addis Ababa, June 11-14, 2002, President Girma reiterated the fact that the major challenges which Africa faces at present in the area of peace and security could also be addressed effectively when the active participation of civil society was ensured at all levels. The Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA) recognises that Civil Society organisations are a force for positive change in Africa’s transition process; they are partners in consolidating democracy and attaining socio-

21 J. W. Harbison, “Civil Society and Political Renaissance,” in: J. W. Harbean, D. Rothchild, N. Chazan. (ed’s), *Civil Society and the State in Africa*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder London 1994, p. 1-33.

22 M. M. Kisubi, “Involving Civil Society in the Fight Against Corruption,” in: *The African Economist* Oct. 2003, 7:19, p. 12-16. Published by the Hadad International Lobby Sweden, in cooperation with the Nina Press.



economic transformation. The New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) is a holistic, comprehensive and integrated strategic framework for the political economic and social development of Africa. It sees civil society organisations as being at the core of ensuring Africa's unity, with a sense of purpose, vision, mission and determination.<sup>23</sup> Religious creativity and new faith based partnerships operating within the public society create vital resources (encouraging) recognition and identity<sup>24</sup> and contributing significantly to civil society aims. The political crisis in Ethiopia following last year's elections (which tended to polarise the relationship between Tigrey and the rest of the country) has highlighted the importance of the growth of civil society for stability and democratic development.

#### 4. Custodianship of Cultural Heritage

One of Ethiopia's most precious resources is her historical heritage. It is Ethiopia's long recorded history and ancient links with the centres of civilization, which give the country its unique identity. This is not only a tourist attraction, but also a cultural resource and foundation of national pride. In Tigray 90% of this cultural heritage consists of Church property (according to Deacon Meseret Hayle Sillasé – of the Government Department of Culture and Tourism). The communist revolution (1974) abolished the former semi-feudal system of land tenure, in which the provision of an economic basis for the support of Church services played a prominent role. The old alliance between church and state was shattered. "The idea of Ethiopia, which once signified stability and continuity rooted in antiquity exploded. The former dream kingdom became one of nightmares, and Ethiopia came to serve as a synonym for disaster."<sup>25</sup> Land which had been assigned to monasteries, was taken away and redistributed to peasants under the communist slogan 'land to the tiller'.

Dispossessed and impoverished by the communist challenge, the church survived and even flourished. A hermit named *abba* Habte Maryam of Kotebé,<sup>26</sup> describes the stages of Church state relations as follows: "At the beginning (1974) the communists tried to close the Church doors, later they allowed them to be a little ajar, and by the end (1991) they had them flung open and begged the church's aid to intercede for their survival." Shedding the baggage of her feudal

23 The Second OAU Civil Society Conference Addis Ababa, June 11-14, 2002. *The Eye on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, A Syndicated Publication of Diplomacy, Strategy, Politics and Economics*, XXII:90 July 2002, Addis Ababa Hadad, Nibna Press, p. 28-32 especially, p. 30.

24 O. Salamink, A. van Harskamp, A. Kumar Giri, *The Development of Religion, The Religion of Development*, Eburon, Delft 2004, p. 5.

25 J. Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia*, New Brunswick 1989, p. 183.

26 Interview, *abba* Habte Maryam of Kotebé – Addis Ababa, 8.8.1998.

past, the church re-emerged as a grassroots people's movement, in the mainstream of national life,<sup>27</sup> as evidenced by enormous new church buildings and increased public participation in religious celebrations.<sup>28</sup>

The centre of orientation of the church shifted to the urban centres, where there was plentiful revenue from newly organized parish councils. The intensification of pastoral activities created new career opportunities for clergy. This dislocated the monastic population and caused a migration to the cities, and eventually towards the South. The events of the communist period caused a shift in accent from elitist to popular, preaching and the painting of pictures in newly erected churches became important. However, traditional expressions of ecclesiastical high culture were neglected. The lack of royal and aristocratic patronage undermined the prestige of the rural churches and monasteries, and removed the basis for the support of their cultural institutions (manuscript ateliers, schools of poetry and higher Church learning etc.).

In other areas of Ethiopia, local piety and traditional links of loyalty induced local farmers' associations to return some land to ensure the survival of the ecclesiastical centres. However, in Tigray arable land is very scarce, and there was resentment due to a feeling that the clergy had formerly taken advantage of the peasantry. This was exacerbated by a prolonged period of civil war, during which recruitment to monasteries and clergy became limited, and the vicinity of ancient churches became the theatre of conflict. For example, the mountains behind the ancient monastery of Gunda Gundo near 'Addigrat became the stronghold of the TPLF (the Tigray Liberation Front that eventually toppled the present government). Monks were often arrested by government troops on suspicion of sympathising with the rebels. The cumulative effect of these events was the dramatic and large scale impoverishment of the rural churches and monasteries.

Monks nuns and rural clergy were traditionally the guardians of cultural heritage. The reduction in their numbers, and their disappearance to urban centres caused a crisis in the custodianship of cultural heritage. Those who were left behind lacked motivation due to a sense of poverty and neglect. A good example is the important monastery of Debre Damo. It was said that lightening descended from heaven on the feast of the transfiguration; the ensuing fire consumed most of the contents of the church treasury. When the author of this article visited the monastery a few months later (1997), the abbot and several of the monks were under arrest for questioning, after the discovery of missing items in monks cells. This illustrates the tragic consequences of poverty-stricken communities being responsible for the custodianship of priceless cultural treasures. It also indicates that in addition to

27 "La renaissance de la tradition nationale Chretienne" and the importance of the parish councils was clearly noted by Jacques Bureau in: "l'eglise, la nation et l'état éthiopiens" in: J.P. Chrétien *L'invention religieuse en Afrique. Histoire et religion en Afrique noire.* Paris 1993, p. 53-54.

28 "The most striking indication of detachment from revolutionary order is the continuing (and perhaps increased) prominence of religion." M. and P. Ottoway, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, Montreal 1988, p. 155.

other measures, the most important remedy is the improvement of the standard of living of the custodians of Church property.

Recent developments in art history emphasize visual anthropology, i.e., not merely taxonomy - description of objects according to form and style, but study of the function of the objects in their original context. Visual anthropology focuses on a number of critical topics associated with visual culture, including the development of art forms and media, artistic agency, and arenas of cultural production. It traces the transformation of customary art forms as they express the reaction of native people's to foreign ideologies and political systems. This implies an anthropological perspective that facilitates unlocking worldviews encoded or incorporated in indigenous aesthetic systems. The practice of visualisation covers a broad spectrum; special attention is given to ritual use of art objects, both in domestic and public spheres. Rituals constitute outstanding media of knowledge transfer and socialization, providing visible 'blue prints' of cultural systems.

There have been initiatives at protection of cultural heritage, which sought to remove precious objects to museums where they could be professionally cared for and made available to a wider public. A good example is the Museum recently established in the old patriarchal palace on the grounds of the Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarchate headquarters, and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Museum collection. Alternatively in some areas councils were set up which took objects away from their traditional custodians and limited their use for cultic purposes. This was laudable and beneficial to a certain extent. However, it is preferable that at the same time a certain number of objects be preserved in their original context. In view of present trends in the discipline of art history and conservation it seems desirable to enable local communities to look after their own art treasures (as has been done in Coptic Egypt with the ENCAP<sup>29</sup> programme organized by the University of Leyden), rather than to remove them and make them into 'dead museum specimens'. At least some Art treasures should enrich and empower local communities, and be used in compliance with their original spiritual intention. Local religious movements often have well educated younger members who can play a role in new types of custodianship.

## 5. Importance of Ancient Monasteries and Churches

Monasteries and Churches constitute the lynchpin of traditional Ethiopian symbolic systems, facilitating alternative means of self-realisation and spacio-temporal experience. Using visual sensual terms, they appeal to Ethiopia's vast illiterate population. Their aesthetic tools include architecture, wall paintings, manuscripts and

<sup>29</sup> Egypt-Netherlands Cooperation in Art Preservation, part of the programme consisted in training monks in Coptic monasteries to set up little museums in order to be able to care better for their own heritage objects.

rituals, which constitute multifunctional bearers of sacred power, incomprehensible through study of isolated specimens. Ancient monasteries and churches constitute chains of memory embodying patterns of religious experience; the performative recreation of history, renegotiating identity and mediating the divine. The key concept of mystical transformation recreates the ecclesiastical context as a second paradise, locus of an angelic state, uniting disparate elements within a single order. Monastic and Church artworks are instrumental in creating a privileged space, facilitating re-enchantment of mundane life and personal empowerment. Religion touches individuals above all through aesthetics. Aesthetics can be understood in its etymological sense, as shared emotional experience. Aesthetics is the basis of community and underpins the sense of identity and belonging.

African scholars such as A. Mbembe<sup>30</sup> have incisively called attention to the 'aesthetics of power' in modern African states, with regard to state ceremonialism and the discursive centrality of bodily metaphors. Postcolonial states (in the Ethiopian case a post-imperial state) have the tendency to deploy models and practices of the public sphere in such ways that they evacuate them of their legitimating content. The ensuing depictions of presidential grandiosity, political sycophancy, ostentatious corruption, flamboyant violence, and coercive ceremonialism are depressing commonplaces. Regimes like Ethiopia's communist *Derg* (provisional ruling council) appropriated the debris of ancestral ritual genres to form the edifice of their political dramaturgy. Little could have been more grotesque than the tenth anniversary of the Ethiopian revolution in 1984, celebrated with great pomp against the background of a devastating famine. A special cordon of troops kept the starving peasants out of the capital to avoid them spoiling the show.

However, despite its mass mobilizations of the proletariat, the *Derg* regime failed in its attempts to generate a state master-discourse, as an official monologue in which the people were spoken to but could not speak back. The *Derg* tried to co-opt the religious establishment, obliging the Orthodox patriarch and chief Mufti of Addis Ababa to sit in parliament and appear on each side of the communist dictator Mengistu Hayle Maryam on state occasions. However, such misappropriations did not reduce the religious idioms to mere ornamentation. Among the local and non-state political imaginaries capable of generating critical responses, the religious organizations played a prominent role. For example, the Orthodox Church became a principal locus of self-narration of power, and the place in which one could imagine oneself anew. Enormous festivals were celebrated with medieval type pageantry, and there were pilgrimage festivities involved tens of thousands of individuals, such as at Maryam Tsiyon in Aksum, and Qullubi Gebri'él monastery near to Dire Dawa. This corresponded to popular expectations and a desire for majesty on the part of the ordinary folk, who shared their rulers' desire to be honoured, to shine and to take part in celebrations. They constituted moments of collective life when the public sphere was enacted according to the socio-political imaginary of the

30 A. Mbembe "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony", *Africa* 62 (1), 1992, 3-37, "The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarly in the Postcolony", *Public Culture* 5:1, 1992, 61-2, "On the Postcolony" University of California Press. Berkeley C. A., 2001.

subject population pursuing a critical consciousness. This impacted on the official –popular interface as a dialogical process of reciprocal influence in the context of a (partially) shared cosmology of power. The government experienced this as a serious challenge and tried to close the major churches around the national parliament, to no avail. On the background of official totalitarian atheism, the mass participation in religious activities centred on churches and monasteries was more than a negative critique of the official order. It was an affirmative negation that implied a utopian project, anchored in the progressive temporal conception that connects the body with collective continuity through death and renewal, and evidencing an autonomous collective political imagination.<sup>31</sup>

Sadly, in Tigrey the turmoil of the civil war, revealed a down side to the religious celebrations, which normally included mandatory elements of the public reception of guests; such as dancing, singing, gift giving, and the feeding of visitors. An elaboration on fundamental principles of social life, such hospitality affected a transfer of valuables that established enduring bonds of social obligation. This constituted a fundamental mode of quotidian mediation between the ecclesiastical - monastic contexts and their surrounding social world. The impoverishment of the monasteries and churches made them unable to fulfil their traditional obligations, violating proper social flows and connections, thus exposing them to isolation and misfortune. It was not only the traditions and norms of cultural heritage, which were threatened by local developments, but the very fabric of the heritage objects themselves. This is explained in more detail in the following section.

## 6. Problems in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage

A French *Report on the State of Deterioration of the Churches in Tigray, Ethiopia* stated: “the condition of the most precious churches, in the historical and economic sense, is today critical. Wealthy villagers aspire to replace the church of their native village by a modern building... old chequered paintings are replaced by new ones with a more photographic aspect ... or whitewashed... an active trade swallows up ancient objects highly valued abroad... the development of tourism often hastens the destruction of patrimony.”<sup>32</sup>

There are two main types of problems, man made and natural disasters; the biggest problem is the lack of awareness: objects kept in private houses gradually pass into private ownership. Those keeping treasures are often old and decrepit; the ignorance of the general public often leads to a desire to destroy old buildings and replace them with new ones, or to add unnecessary cement additions to old structures. Aged clergy burn books accidentally with tapers. There is a custom of not sweeping or cleaning sacred sites. Negligence unhygienic conditions

31 M. Karlström, “Power in the Postcolony”, *Africa* 73: 1 2003, p. 57-75.

32 C. Boissavy, C. Lepage, J. Mercier, *Report on the State of Deterioration of the Churches in Tigray, Ethiopia*, August 2003, p. 3.

and lack of ventilation cause decay. Those guarding treasures receive insufficient wages and are unmotivated. Tension between clergy and laity create dissension, making theft easier. Inaccurate Church registrar systems make it possible to substitute old items with new ones.<sup>33</sup>

At great festivals large numbers of cheap Asian and Mediterranean imported prints are sold, which do not reflect Ethiopian cultural heritage. Foreign goods undermine the work of local artisans and engage young people in an alien mindset. Architectural and other innovations are introduced, without any regard for Ethiopian traditions. Western inspired modern art works replace ancient ones. There is no process of reflection, and the result is spiritual and cultural impoverishment.

In the course of interviews Orthodox Church leaders including; Abune Merha Christos Archbishop of Meqele, Abune Mekarios of 'Addigrat, *abba* Welde Giyorgis abbot and highly respected moral authority of Medhané 'Alem Monastery Meqele, stressed the poverty and neglect of ancient monasteries in particular as prime reasons for the problem of the conservation of cultural heritage. The Ethiopian Orthodox Holy Synod has discussed this problem without coming up with any resolutions. Orthodox leaders stated for example: During the imperial period, the monasteries had great power and prestige, under the communist regime things were better than now and currently monasteries are forgotten. The problems in Tigray are worse than elsewhere in Ethiopia, especially due to the scarcity of arable land (average peasant holdings are 0.5 hectares). Without sufficient food, drink or clothing, there is a phenomenon of monastic migration to the cities, spurred on by desire for career and advancement. In large *Debres* (Parish Churches) in Addis Ababa there are more monks than in many monasteries in Tigray. Monasteries are no longer able to extend the traditional hospitality on feasts, or even cater to their own needs. Bearers of intangible culture such as traditional teachers are reduced to poverty surviving on wages of 50 birr a month. Monasteries in Tigray are often very inaccessible, making it difficult to benefit from the largesse of pilgrims and town dwellers. There has been a lack of follow up to aid projects.<sup>34</sup>

A Study by G. Gebre Yesus submitted to the Tigray Tourist Commission found chronic food insecurity in many monasteries (Dec. 2004). In some cases, this could be rectified by better use of local resources involving irrigation and other means. G. Gebre Yesus wrote that monks who had a great role in preserving antiquities, were abandoning their abodes at an alarming rate, the main reason for this exodus being food insecurity and hunger. Because of this many monasteries remain without guardians. Four monasteries: Indabba Yohanni, Chech Sillasé, May-Anbesa and Debre-Tserabi were investigated, mainly located in the Giba watershed area. Malnutrition was evident among monks in the monastery; food was available from October to January, but not during the deficit months from February to September.

33 Interview, Deacon Meseret Haile Selassie, Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Asmara 28.12.2005.

34 Interviews with *abune* Merha Kristos, Archbishop of Meqele, *abune* Mekarios of 'Addigrat, *abba* Welde Giyorgis abbot and highly respected moral authority of Medhané 'Alem Monastery ,Meqele, during the period 25.12.2005-5.1.2006.

Coping strategies of the monks during deficit periods included begging and temporary migration to better off monasteries and urban areas. The author of this article can corroborate the findings of G. Gebre Yesus' report from personal experience. Five years ago while doing field research I visited various monasteries in Tigrey. In the period immediately preceding, the Second Littmann conference I was again involved in research in Tigray. To my astonishment, the general development in the Tigray region has had little impact on the monastic sphere (with a few notable exceptions). Basic issues such as food insecurity are very noticeable. While attending religious celebrations I often met monks who spoke apologetically of being obliged to live in parish churches, and not being able to reside in historic monasteries due to the unavailability of the most essential basic necessities.

## 7. Government and Religious Initiatives to Safeguard Cultural Heritage

There have been international initiatives to safeguard cultural heritage. However, the death three years ago of the Ethiopian scholar Girma Elias who played a key role in mediating between Church authorities and foreign academic organisations had a negative effect in the sphere of international cooperation. The European Community sponsored project to document cultural heritage under J. Mercier has recently ground to a halt. However, Government funded registration projects are going ahead at a rate of 1000 registrations a year (third year check), now covering over 6,500 artefacts. There is a 5, year plan to register 1/3 of all heritage artefacts. Various awareness-raising programs have been initiated using media such as radio, and courses for clergy. Meseret Hayle Sillasé a theologian and conservator of the Commission for Culture and Tourism, gives courses in heritage management at the Kesaté Birhan Orthodox Theological College in Meqele. There is a Tourism Council including members of different organisations including Orthodox Church Bishops and representatives of the Catholic Church.

The above mentioned French report stated: "Besides mobilizing the international community... it is equally necessary to sensitize the population in Ethiopia... and to value the contribution of individual or collective contributions to the preservation of heritage" (p. 3). The various voluntary associations of a religious nature supplement government initiatives. The largest is *Mabbere Qiddusan*, recognized as a Department of the Sunday school movement within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Recently they organized a questionnaire study by University students in 70 monasteries, documenting problems, feasibility for development, accessibility etc. Nine monasteries were prioritized. A project has been implemented, in Koyetsa Abune Samuel monastery to upgrade agriculture through irrigation. In Degena Abune Gebre Kristos a plan for irrigation is in the process of implementation. Projects for Chech Sillasé Tembén central zone, Gunda Gundo Maryam, and others

have been submitted. There are also various projects to upgrade monastic real estate in cities to generate more income and to increase animal raising (camels at Dibo nunnery) and apiculture.

In February 2002 monasteries and ancient churches featured prominently in an exhibition project in Meqele organised by *Mabbere Qiddusan*, visited by 7-10,000 people. The widely read M.K. publication *Hamer* magazine has devoted numerous articles to the preservation of cultural heritage, the situation of the monasteries and traditional art. Over 10,000 students participate in spiritual and catechetical activities organized by *Mabbere Qiddusan* in Tigray. This includes activities in different monasteries, including provision of different types of aid. A project to make traditional students self-supporting through handicrafts has been studied. In general, there is an attempt to provide knowledge and material support to enable monasteries to make better use of their resources and thus become self-supporting.<sup>35</sup>

Another movement *Mabbere Selam*, founded by *baḥatawi* Welde Sillasé of Waldebba monastery (*Sené 14, June 2, 1994* Eth. Cal.) aims to assist monasteries in distress through members contributions. The association has more than 500 committed members and at least 1000 participants attend monthly conferences. Founded in Tigray and now also present in Addis Ababa they have donated more than 25,000 Birr in cash as well as a large amount in kind to provide material aid for renovation, assistance for spiritual services and immediate food support. They also assist in designing projects and doing research. Currently their constitution has been submitted in order to obtain official recognition.

Up to date their projects include: Yohannes Kama monastery near Samre, South Tigray, financial aid was given to launch a project to make a dam to protect the monastery from flooding by a nearby river, which threatens to destroy the monastery. Abune Selama Kesaté Birhan Monastery, Tembén, large quantities of cement, food aid and clothing were donated. Mika'él Amba, 8,000 Birr was given in direct financial aid; in addition provision was made for the installation of access ladders, food materials and ecclesiastical paraphernalia. At Maryam Qorqor in Ḥawzén and Abreha and Atsbiha monasteries minor financial aid was given. Aberintant, the central monastery of the Waldebba complex, received more than 5,000 Birr in aid, featuring food and especially clothing. In the association workshop metal window and door frames were made for the recently re-established monastery Church at Asira Maṭira, near Atsbi (Tesfa Alem Chairman *Mabbere Selam*, Interview Meqele 2 January 2006).

The Catholic Church in Tigray, which now has an indigenous highly educated leadership, has also played a role in the preservation of cultural heritage. This is particularly the case around the diocese of 'Addigrat, which is a major sphere of Catholic influence. Several years ago part of the orange groves, which are the principal source of income of the ancient monastery of Gunda Gundo were

35 Interview with *Mabbere Qiddusan* leaders: Yemane Hailu - General Secretary, Wubetu Bihon - Monastic Development section, Daniel Gebre Medhen - Chairman sub-section Meqele 30.12.2005.



swept away by the devastating overflow of a nearby river. The Catholic bishop of Addigrat swiftly mobilised the Catholic Secretariat to build an enormous retaining wall, which protected the monastery from further ravages by floodwater. Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims participate in an association for the protection of cultural heritage in Tigray. There are numerous other smaller associations and initiatives, both of a religious and secular nature who make an invaluable contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage. They help to create a link between isolated monasteries, churches and the general-public, and raise public awareness.

## 8. Conclusion

This article has discussed the multifaceted issue of religion and development, explaining why in the context of globalisation it has become an important topic. An agenda was outlined, identifying areas in which the religious dimension could make an important contribution to development initiatives. The relationship between religion and the spheres of ecology and civil society were highlighted. These areas are clearly of particular relevance in the Ethiopian – Tigrayn context, and deserve to be the object of future research.

The major thrust of the article was the relationship between religion and the preservation of cultural heritage. In the Tigreyan context this refers particularly to the patrimony of the main religious community the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. Despite the political upheavals of the transition from imperial (semi-feudal) rule to communist revolution and eventually ethnic federalism, the Orthodox Church has retained a clear moral authority and social profile. However, a large part of its traditional means of subsistence has been removed and there has been a shift in emphasis from elitist to popular culture, and from the large contemplative monasteries of the rural areas, to the urban parish churches with their income generating parish councils. This has resulted in a dislocation of monastic population towards the cities and the south (where there are career prospects). The depopulation and weakening of the rural churches and monasteries, which were the traditional guardians of cultural heritage poses a serious problem for the future. The accumulation of different factors concerning the preservation of cultural heritage has created a crisis, which needs to be addressed to avoid the loss of a large part of the national patrimony in the near future.

International initiatives are making a major contribution to artistic preservation projects. However, a recent breakdown in communication and trust between foreign organisations, and church and civil authorities has hampered progress in this area. In view of recent developments in approaches to the history and preservation of art, the above-mentioned factors and the prevalent significance of the visual anthropology orientation, it is desirable to empower local actors to preserve heritage objects in their original context.

Meanwhile indigenous grass roots religious associations are making an important contribution on the local level. They are able to mobilise young professionals to

work in a voluntary capacity, to design projects for assisting ancient monasteries and churches, and to mediate with local urban communities. The important resource potential constituted by such spirituality motivated young professionals illustrates what Professor Gerrie Ter Haar identified as the prime rationale for including religion in the development discourse: The need to maximalise the resources for development. The enthusiasm of such groups could be disadvantageous if not channelled in the right direction. For example, the indiscriminate supply of concrete could result in undesirable additions being made to ancient structures. Voluntary organisations have a good ability to design projects, but only a limited ability to execute them due to financial constraints. Members of such organisations are more dedicated than other individuals, and therefore more likely to return and serve their local communities when they receive scholarships to study abroad. In the long run it is essential that there be more coordination between different voluntary associations, government bodies, NGO's and academic institutions.

It is encouraging to discern some hopeful signs in the Tigrayn context. These include the presence of a young generation of monks and nuns, who are beginning to become more resourceful and innovative. The presence of young nuns in particular is important, because they tend to be more stable and less inclined to drift to the cities than monks. The restoration of the ancient monastery of Asira Maṭira near Atsbi, and its determination to play a positive role in the social and cultural life of the local community is another example of positive developments. "The recent weakening of the African state has in many ways been traumatic, yet it has also contributed to the opening of new spaces for ideological and institutional renovation and hopes for a second liberation. If they can share an aesthetics of power (with religious and other organisations), they must develop jointly a mechanics of legitimation and accountability that is adequate both to the aesthetics and to the institutional potency of the modern state."<sup>36</sup> The preservation of cultural heritage in Tigray requires the concerted efforts of the whole community; the contribution of faith-based movements is indispensable.

36 M. Karlström, "Power in the Postcolony", in: *Africa* 73:1 2003, p. 57-75.