Religious Change and Islam: The Emergence of the Salafi Movement in Bale, Ethiopia

Terje Østebø

This paper intends to shed light on the early emergence and growth of the Salafi movement in Bale. Focusing on Islamic scholars returning from studies in Saudi in the late 1960s, the paper discusses the role of these individuals, as well as the nature and content of the new impulses they brought. Further, the discourse over cultural and religious practices caused by these new impulses will be duly discussed, particularly with reference to the role of Islamic literacy in the context of Bale.

Introduction

Islam in Ethiopia has often been contrasted to Islam of the Middle East and portrayed as pragmatic, tolerant and inclusive. Esoteric, Sufi-oriented and syncretistic, it is largely singled out as a homogeneous and inert phenomenon, devoid of any major changes up until the late 20th century. Arguably, such a picture conceals the inherent diversity and dynamics of Ethiopian Islam. Disparate patterns of Islamisation, occurring at different points of history, and influenced from various directions contributed to shaping of a variety of Muslim communities with distinct localised features. Home to a number of Sufi brotherhoods and with the presence of three of the four madhabs, Islam in Ethiopia is best characterised as a heterogeneous and dynamic phenomenon. This dynamic nature is further demonstrated by a recurrent trend of religious change occurring at various stages in history, in which Ahmed Gragn may represent the most known reformer. As amply discussed by Hussein Ahmed in his survey of 19th century Islam in Wollo, change was an essential aspect of indigenous Islam in this period, where winds of change in the wider world of Islam also found pathways to Ethiopia, leading to controversy and tensions between reformers and defenders of the status quo (Hussein Ahmed 2001). This illustrates the existence of interactions between trans-local and localised Islam and between groups within the Ethiopian Muslim community contributing to constant negotiations and the mouldings of inherent and new messages.

Also in his survey, Hussein stated that “it is interesting to note that Ethiopian Islam did not respond to the Wahhabi call” (2001: 73). The intention of this paper is not to prove Hussein wrong. Undoubtedly, Hussein’s descriptions of 19th century Wollo are accurate. However, moving more than a century ahead, we see a complete different situation, with Salafism making a clear impact on contemporary Islam in Ethiopia.

Based on findings from an extensive fieldwork, this paper intends to shed some light on the initial emergence and growth of the Salafi movement in Bale. This province was

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1 PhD-Candidate, Dept. of Comparative Religion, Stockholm University & Research-affiliate at Christian Michelsen’s Institute, Bergen. Email: terje.ostebo@cmi.no
2 The term commonly used in Ethiopia is Wahhabism. Because of the term’s pejoragatory connotation and as Salafism is increasingly is being used in the scholarly discourse, I have chosen this term. Other terms that are used are ahl al-Sunna wa Jama’a and ahl al-Tawhid.
one of the areas where the movement at an early stage gained foothold, and is today one of the strongholds of Salafism in Ethiopia. My objective is to contribute with insights on the movement in its particularity; hopefully contributing to a broader understanding of Salafism in general. Linking the empirical material with various theoretical perspectives on religious change, I moreover seek to forward some reflections around this phenomenon. The discussion is situated around three interrelated themes; first, the interaction of various contexts and the transcendence of boundaries; secondly, the issue of Islamic literacy as affecting change; and thirdly, the aspect of socio-economical relations.

Religious Change

This perspective of this contribution draws largely from the discourse on religious change in an African context. Initiated through an essay by Robin Horton in 1971, a rather intense debate has occupied a large numbers of Africanists, and still does. Numerous publications have discussed the concepts of conversion and religious change, various determinant factors and prospective outcomes of change. While each of these contributions would contain important misjudgements as well as having restricted valuable as isolated approaches, I concur with Droogers’ argument for an eclectic model. Rather than discharging them, he argues for a combination of former perspectives, construing them as complementary to each other (Droogers 1985). In this paper, religious change is seen as change occurring within a same religious system; it does not involve the exchange of religious affiliation from one religion to another. It basically understands religious change as a reciprocal process of stimulus and response; between advocates of a particular idea and targeted audiences. Whereas many of the former contributions came to pay much attention to structural developments within the recipient communities, and relatively little attention to the agents of change (Clarke 1987: 136), I believe we have to recognise the role of the agents and their discursive relationships to the audience for the understanding of religious change. Furthermore, as these are situated in their respective contexts as well as being active in the transcending of boundaries, we simultaneously need to consider these contexts and the interactions between them. This would imply a bottom-up perspective, in which contexts and interactions between actors within and across boundaries of these contexts would play a decisive role in the conceptualisation of religious change.

Whereas most of the earlier contributions largely focused on conversion to Christianity (and Islam) in the late 19th and early 20th century, this paper is situated in more recent history and in the particular case of Ethiopia. Clearly, this will influence the discussion. Seeking to understand Salafism and religious change in Bale, we ought to be reminded of the dynamic dimension inherent to all religions. Determined in its

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pursuit to bring reforms, Salafism remains a separate set of ideas with its own particular origin and history. As one of several movements in Islam, its emergence and development was produced by and connected to given historical circumstances in various layers of contexts. In the case of Ethiopia, the movement’s program for bringing a clean break with the past has been seen as something qualitatively different from other movements. On the other hand, and as I would argue, it could also be seen as yet another representation of the mentioned intrinsic dimension of dynamics within religion. Thus, Salafism needs to be situated in the historical and cultural particularities in which it appears, and rather than an approach determined by ideological or political overtones, only a thorough investigation of the movement’s actual appearance would contribute to the understanding of its particularity and commonality. From this perspective, Salafism is as common and as complex as any movement of religious reform.

Islam in Bale and Religious Change

The first attempt to bring reform in Bale is ascribed to a certain Sheikh Muhammed Qatiba of Gololcha district. Returning home in the early 1940s, after 23 years of religious studies in Harar, Wollo and in al-Azhar University, Sheikh Muhammed embarked on a campaign to reform many of the Sufi practices of his contemporaries. It was mainly the use of drums accompanying the singing of Sufi litanies that was targeted, where he argued that this stimulated the unlawful dancing of males and females together. Similar ideas had already been raised by certain sheikhs in Arsi, and the use of drums was also forbidden at the shrine of Abbu Koye in Bale.

In contrast to Wollo, where Islam had been firmly established centuries ago, and where the reformers were struggling to “bring about a reconciliation between mysticism and the rigidity and barrenness of dogmatic Islam” (Hussein Ahmed 2001: 98), the reforms in Bale were initiated among a population who relatively recently had adapted Islam, and who to a large degree was living “with one foot on either side of the fence” (Fisher 1973: 33). The Islamisation of the Bale Oromo was a relatively recent phenomenon, and must be seen in relation to the general Sufi revival in the late 18th century, which had a clear impact on Ethiopia. Whereas other Muslim communities in Ethiopia were more directly affected, the impact on Bale was of an indirect nature. Sufism reached Bale from its neighbouring areas, where it already had been interpreted and moulded within these localities. Representations such as the Sufi main turuq never played any major role in Bale and neither was there a development of any trans-local identity of affiliation to the different brotherhoods. Rather, Sufism revolved around particular shrines, like that of Sheikh Hussein, and with Sufism developing into a popularised and localised form. Through this process of Islamisation, Muslims and adherents of the Oromo religion came to live side by side, in turn resulting in a gradual accommodation to the new faith. An intrinsic part of the Islamisation process was thus the infusion of pre-Islamic Oromo elements into Islam; either in the form of Oromo

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7 The shrine of Sheikh Hussein resurfaced in the late 18th century as a result of the activities of a certain Sheikh Muhammed Tilma Tilmo. Braukämper claims him to be a Somali missionary sent by Emir Abd al-Shakur of Harar (1783-93), whereas all oral traditions emphasis his (Bale) Oromo origin. See Braukämper. Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia, Collected Essays.
religious practices becoming Islamised, or as survivals in a more “purer” form. This inevitably encumbered the development of Islamic scholarship in Bale, conformity to the main sunni doctrines and the performance of the obligatory Islamic practices. With an absence of mosques, my informants repeatedly claimed that salat was performed only during funerals and at the celebration of id al-Fitr. Obviously, knowledge was a commodity unevenly distributed, in the sense that the certain groups were more acquainted with the prescripts of Islam, and consequently more critical to the popularised and localised version of Bale Islam. Contrary to Trimingham who asserted that “the cleric is at one and the same time teacher-guide and medicine-man” (Trimingham 1959: 31), the religious leadership in Bale was, as we will see far more differentiated, representing incongruous religious traditions.

Sheikh Muhammed Qatiba is today regarded as an icon for the Salafi movement, yet it would be incorrect to label him a Salafi. Sheikh Muhammed never sought to abolish Sufism as such. He never opposed the ziarah to the shrines, nor did he question the ability of the awliyah (sing. wali) to intercede with God. Rather, as well as other previous reformers from Wollo and other Muslim communities of Ethiopia, he should be viewed as a representation of a diverse Muslim society, whereby conceptions of Islamic dogmas and subsequent evaluative perceptions of existing praxis prevailed alongside each other, and sometimes in mutual competition. Furthermore, it illustrates the dynamic nature of Ethiopian Islam, where a relatively isolated area such as Bale was influenced by movements in the wider Islamic world; influences moulded into the local context through dialectic negotiations among different groups within this locality.

Transcending Boundaries

The incorporation of indigenous communities into a larger macrocosm has repeatedly been forwarded as the pervasive factor for conversion to so-called world religions; i.e. Islam and Christianity. The notion of the shattered microcosm, as introduced by Trimingham (1955; 1959) and elaborated by Horton (1971) emphasises the sudden impact of Western colonial powers leading to the collapse of traditional political, economical and social structures, in turn causing the disruption of “ethnic and local religions” (Trimingham 1955: 12-13). This crisis allegedly created a conducive situation for the expansion of Islam and Christianity. Albeit forwarding important insights, this perspective tends to downplay the fact that the changes stemmed from ideas originating in a different context, and that the process of change involved the transcendence of boundaries by certain agents. It would thus be crucial to ask who these agents were, where were they from and what factors were involved in the process of cross-territorial and cross-cultural interaction?

The introduction of Salafism to Bale involved the transcendence of spacial, cultural, ideological and linguistic boundaries. As an ideology, it originated in the province of Najd, present-day Saudi Arabia. It is ascribed to the teaching of Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahab (1703-1792), who by forming an alliance with a tribal leader, Muhammed ibn Saud, managed to utilise his ideas as the ideological force for the unification of the local tribes and the establishment of the Saudi monarchy. Since then, Salafism has been the guiding ideology of Saudi Arabia, the very heart of Salafi Islam. Salafism remained largely confined behind the borders of the monarchy, and up until the 20th century, it did not have much impact on Muslims in the wider Islamic world. This was firstly due to their stance of religious exclusiveness resulting in a policy of isolation, where contacts with other non-Salafi Muslims were viewed as a threat to their religious purity.
Secondly, the Saudis’ politico-religious grip on the Hijaz remained weak until the 1930s, clearly reducing the impact Salafism could have had upon foreign pilgrims (Commins 2006: 30, 40, 72f).

**The Italian Factor and the Hajj**

In spite of its proximity to the Islamic mainland, Ethiopia’s Muslims remained relatively isolated from the rest of the Muslim world. Hijj was mostly performed by those on the costal areas and in Harar, while rarer in communities in the hinterland. As a result of the opening of a trade route to the port of Tajura in the end of the 19th century, pilgrimage from Wollo increased (Hussein Ahmed 2001: 76), yet the general figure remained low.8

The Italian occupation (1935-1942) initiating the classical colonial “divide and rule” policy, came to favour Ethiopia’s Muslim population over the Christian political elite. Moreover, seeking support for their colonial project from the Saudis, they made an effort to portray themselves as protectors of the Ethiopian Muslims’ religious rights (Erlich 2007: 39f). One way of doing this was by encouraging and subsidising the pilgrimage to the holy cities. In 1936 the number of Ethiopian pilgrims reached somewhere between 1 600 and 1 900, whereas after the restoration of the monarchy, the number plunged to only 57 (Erlich 2007: 73-73). Coinciding with King Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud’s policy of adding Hijaz to his realm and the subsequent establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, foreign pilgrims now became increasingly exposed to the Salafi doctrines.9 With the increase in Ethiopian pilgrims, Salafism gained an initial foothold in the town of Harar. Although Harar was important as a bridgehead for the introduction of Salafi Islam in this area, centres for Salafi teaching were also established among the Oromo of Hararge. Some has argued that the introduction of qat as a cash-crop in Hararge led to an increase of the hajj among the Oromo, in turn returning to disseminate the new teaching among their kinsmen.10 According to my findings, the number of pilgrims departing from Bale during the Italian period was relatively low. Instead, a larger number was sent for training to Harar, where they through contacts with Oromo Salafis got acquainted with the new teaching.

The expansion of infrastructure initiated during the Italian occupation, and its continuation in the succeeding decades obviously contributed to increase travelling. Already in 1929 the railway to Djibouti was completed, and with the construction of new roads and improved bus-services during the 1950s and 1960s, travelling become more easy, consequently leading to a growth in the number of pilgrims crossing the Red Sea. As many of the pilgrims came under Salafi influence, this inevitably contributed to further dissemination of its ideas among the peoples in the south eastern parts of the country.11

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9 It is important to note that the Saudi king showed a certain degree of sensitivity to other religious sentiments in the Hijaz. See Commins, David. 2006. *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*. London: Tauris.


11 Important for the introduction of Salafism to Arsi were Sheikh Aman Ahmad Abd’allah (Aman Lode), Sheikh Ahmad Abdallah (Ahmad Nunu) and Sheikh Hassan Gammada. See Temam Haji. 2002. "Islam in Arsi, Southeast Ethiopia (Ca. 1840-1974)." MA Thesis in History, AAU.
Improved communication also brought various localities within Ethiopia closer to each other. In Bale, construction of roads, of airports and improved means of communication during the 1950s and 1960s contributed in moulding the borders of locality, bringing the province more in contact with the trans-local context. This development was accompanied with a process of urbanisation and the increased significance of trading. Both Horton (1975) and Tringham (1959) have emphasised the role of commercial communities in bringing religious change. Using the dubious concept of the “urban mind”, Tringham has argued that the urban merchant is more “individualistic and wide-visioned” than his rural co-religionist (1959: 25). Similarly, Horton talks about the merchants who “had broken away to a great extent from [their] microcosms”, thus more receptive to new ideas (1975: 376-377). Although both writers deal with initial conversion to Islam in a period much earlier than our case, their arguments are nevertheless of relevance for Bale. In the late 1940s a class of Muslim Oromo merchants emerged in Robe. Frequently travelling to the neighbouring provinces and to Addis Ababa, they soon became acquainted with alternative trends at that time. Dislocated from the social structures of their rural home-areas, this furthermore led them to question many of the religious practices among their contemporaries. In 1963/4 the group of merchants was joined by a certain Sheikh Muhammed-Amin Chaffa, a native of Arsi settling in Robe. Through his religious education in Harar he had come in contact with Salafi teaching, yet he was not strongly advocating such views in public. Shortly after his arrival in Robe he formed a *jama’a* in Nur mosque (built in 1959), where he gathered the group of merchants for the study of the Qu’ran.12 The size of the group varied from ten to twenty persons. The establishment of the *jama’a* corresponded with the appointment of Hajji Muhammed Hajji Mustafa as qadi of Bale, who was a graduate from al-Azhar University. Regularly attending the *jama’a* and preaching at jumma in Nur mosque, he became an important resource for the *jama’a* in Robe. As he openly opposed the popularised Islam in Bale, he came to be an important factor for the formulation of the *jama’a*’s ideology. It must be assumed that the group did not initially have a clear Salafi identity. They knew about a new movement in Hararge and in Arsi, yet they had little knowledge about the deeper tenets of the Salafi teaching. Emphasising the strict adherence to the principle of God’s singularity (*tawhid*), they fiercely rejected pilgrimage to the shrines, as well as other practices seen as irreconcilable with this idea. Refraining from participating in the pilgrimages, they would on occasions be labelled as “Wahhabis”, yet due to their economic status and their piety they were nevertheless highly respected among the people. The *jama’a* remained a rather closed circle, devoted to the study of the Islamic sources and came to represent an alternative religious orientation in Bale.

**The “Journey of the 80” and Sheikh Abubakr Muhammed**

The number of pilgrims from Bale to the Hijaz remained relatively low in the first decades after the occupation. Those who sought religious education usually travelled to Hararge and Arsi, with some few to Jimma. Then in 1962, a particular incident would prove to be decisive for the contacts between Saudi and Bale. The so-called “journey of

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12 *Jama’a* which usually refers to a “society” or a “gathering of people”, constituted in Bale a study-circle, a religious school or a society.
the “journey of the 80” became formative in establishing new relations between the two localities; both in quantitative and qualitative terms.

In Saudi Arabia, King Faisal was on his hand initiating a policy for promoting the kingdom as a player in Middle Eastern politics and to balance the influence of Nasser’s pan-Arabism. Establishing contacts all over the Muslim world, as well as with the non-Muslim world (the latter was due to the discovery of petroleum), the king’s vision was to forward Islam as the unifying power in the region. This policy also forced the Salafi establishment in Saudi to adjust their exclusivist position in relation to the outside world, and came to accompany the monarch by seeking to export the Salafi doctrines to a wider audience. This involved among others the establishment of Muslim World League (MWL) in 1962 and important for our case, the formation of several centres for Islamic learning, which soon became pivotal in exporting the Salafi message. The most prominent of these was the Islamic University in Medina established in 1961, offering religious education to an increasing number of foreign students.

Those participating in “the journey of the 80” were among the first to enter the Islamic University in Medina. Studies and living-costs were abundantly funded by the Saudis, enabling many to pursue their studies for years. News of this possibility soon reached Bale, and during the 1960s and 1970s an increasing number of Bale Muslims crossed the Red Sea in search for knowledge. Needles to say perhaps; these people would in turn become important in bringing back Salafism to Bale. One of those departing on the “journey of the 80” was a certain Sheikh Abubakr Muhammed. A native of Shaya, a village few kilometres west of Robe, he received his initial education in Bale, before leaving for Saudi. Sheikh Abubakr never entered any Islamic university, but remained under the guardianship of a certain Sheikh Abdallah in the town of Abaha outside Mecca. Instead of attending formal studies, he became well versed in the techniques of da’wa, something he to the fullest would pursue upon his return to Bale. This return came in 1969, yet it was not until 1971 that he embarked on his campaign of reforming Islam. Focusing on the necessity to worship the single God alone, and making fierce attacks on the existing religious practices of his surroundings, he was to become the main tool for religious change and remembered as the icon of the early Salafi movement in Bale – labelled Sheikh Mufti by his followers. Inevitably, his campaign did, as we will return to, soon spark fierce controversies within the Muslim community.

In the sense that it was introduced by indigenous agents and not by expatriate missionaries, Salafism in Bale was a home-grown phenomenon. It was the Muslim Oromo that crossed the borders and brought the new ideas into the locality, and it is interesting to note that even on the trans-local level, the Salafi doctrines were very much moulded within the ethnic group of the Oromo; among those of Hararge, Arsi and Bale. Situated within a relatively similar cultural universe, these agents were arguably in a better position to negotiate the Salafi message in a way enhancing the reception in their respective localities.

Literacy and Religious Change

The transcending of boundaries bringing localities together and paving the way for the introduction of new ideas into Bale was also imbedded in a discourse on sources authorising religious practice, where a new focus on literacy is notable. The relationship between literacy and religious change has been emphasised by Fisher who argued that literacy have had the effect of “conserving the status quo in belief and behaviour, and [...] introducing radical changes” (1973: 35). From the Weberian tradition, frozen religious traditions in a scriptural form has ostensibly been associated with so-called world religions (i.e. Christianity, Islam, etc). In contrast to so-called traditional religions, the world religions are thus perceived as more rational, coherent and systematic, where Weber consequently saw religious change in the sense of moving from a traditional religion to either Christianity or Islam as a process of rationalisation. In light of an increased focus on literacy in the process of change in Bale, it would be relevant to ask whether this perspective has anything to contribute for the understanding of religious change in this case.

Literacy and Resistance to Change

First of all, I would argue that a less developed literal tradition in Bale thwarted the resistance to change. As already noted, the acceptance of Islam in Bale did not create a clear-cut break with past religious practices; rather their infusion within the framework of Islam. The recent Islamisation of the Oromo in Bale also had an impact on the development of Islamic scholarship. In Harar and Wollo where Islamic scholarship was well-established within the Muslim community, many of the shrines in Wollo were centres of teaching that “fostered a tradition of literacy and conformity to Sunni Islam” (Hussein Ahmed 2001: 94). In Bale this was less obvious. Although Islamic scholarship was disseminated at Dirre Sheikh Hussein, the pilgrimage itself and performance of rituals with a clear pre-Islamic colour was more important. With the exception of a certain Sheikh Abd al-Wahab Yunus in Agarfa, none of my informants were able to mention any indigenous alim in 19th century Bale. Rather, the ulama at that time consisted of refugees from Wollo, like Sheikh Ahmed Wollo and Hajji Muhammed Siraj, the first qadi of Bale. It was not until the first part of the 20th century that a class of indigenous ulama emerged, partly facilitated by the policy of the Italians. Travels in search for religious knowledge increased, taking people across the borders of Bale. Centres for learning also appeared, yet only a few could offer teaching in ilm on a higher level. Books were a scarce commodity, shared among the ulama and copied by hand. In contrast to Wollo, Harar and even to Arsi where the ulama composed indigenous religious texts, this was totally absent in Bale. In addition to the ulama, the religious stratum in Bale consisted of a larger group of Qu'anic teachers with only a rudimentary knowledge in Arabic. Then there were the guardians of the shrines (darga) and the so-called fuqrahs, individuals with no religious training who by claiming to possess karama performed miracles of various kinds.

Yet the non-literal Oromo rendered great respect for the scriptures of Islam. Although inaccessible in its Arabic form, the book was seen as divine and as directly

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14 The pilgrimage known as muda has been described by Braukämper as a continuation of the veneration to the abba muda of Dello, an Oromo religious institution. See Braukämper. Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia, Collected Essays. This is also elaborated by Umer Nure. 2006. “The Pilgrimage to Dirre Sheikh Hussein: Its Social Organization and Overall Roles.” MA Thesis in Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University.
inhabiting a distinct power. One of my informants told me that his village’s imam used to sit daily at a particular spot regularly reading from the Qur'an. He was the only one in the village who mastered the language, and the only one who prayed regularly. Yet the villagers viewed the imam’s reading and prayer as protective and as sufficient for the whole village’s salvation. The word in its physical form was perceived as powerful, having the ability to protect and to cure. Passages from the Qur'an were widely used as talismans; hung around the neck, used as slate-water and kept as protections for various threats. For many of the religious teachers, a considerable part of their income was collected from production of talismans and from so-called “magic writing”, where books on astrology were commonly used to diagnose illness and to foretell the future.

In other words, the recent Islamisation of the Oromo had impinged on the development of Islamic scholarship in Bale. Knowledge was limited to a small class of religious specialists, with restricted acquaintance to the religious scriptures, and moreover, the literal tradition of Islam was by the populace perceived as representations of a largely “magical” world. In turn, this becomes pivotal for understanding the process of change brought by the Salafis.

Those travelling to Saudi came from the non-literal Oromo society of Bale. None of them originated from a line of ulama families. Most of them had received their basic Islamic education in Bale or in the surrounding areas, usually in fiqh according to the Shafiyya madhab, and beside this their acquaintance with the variety of Islamic scholarship was limited. Coming into contact with Salafi ideas, either in Hararge or through institutions of learning in Saudi, this lack of knowledge made them unprepared to critically question the new message. Highly respective of the teachers in Hararge, and even more so in Saudi – well equipped with books and arguments based on the Qur'an and the hadith, these students from Bale soon found themselves captured by the Salafi message. As expressed by one of my informants; “when these people from Bale were presented with a book by ibn Taymiyya – where the cover read al-sheikh al-Islam, they immediately embraced him”. In contrast, areas like Wollo and Harar, vested in a long history of Islam which had produced a strong class of ulama and a tradition of indigenous Islamic literacy, were far more prepared to resist the Salafi dogmas. Having sufficient of centres of learning, the people from these areas was less prone to pursue religious studies abroad. And if they did, their fluency in the Islamic literacy made them aware of existing doctrinal differences, and enabled them to avoid and resist the Salafi teaching. Lacking such resources, this obviously paved the way for religious change in Bale. Returning from Saudi, graduates with formal certificates in Islamic studies, with stacks of books and fluent in Arabic and in the religious disciplines had clear advantages encountering the non-literal population of Bale. As expressed by one of my informants; “they brought evidence from the Qur'an and other books, and they were asking us to bring our evidence from books. Because we had no books, no evidence - our belief fell”.

**Literacy as Enhancing Change**

As already indicated, the famous sermon held by Sheikh Abubakr in 1971 sparked an intense controversy. Soon after, the Muslims in Robe and surrounding found themselves separated into two groups; a small group supporting Sheikh Abubakr and a much larger group fiercely opposing him. The latter group was led by a certain Hajji Adam Sado of Goba. He was a man of great reputation in Bale; as an ardent opponent to Amhara rule, propagator of the Oromo nationalist movement and a supporter of the Bale rebellion in
the 1960s. As tensions aggravated, with the two groups forwarding harsh threats and accusations against each other, the provincial government saw no other option than to intervene. Later the same year, they called for a large meeting in Goba where the two parties should be given the chance to present their cases, and where also the ulama of Bale were invited to give their opinion. As expected, the meeting did not reach on a binding conclusion. Rather, a compromise was issued, stating the right for each group to follow their conviction and to propagate their respective views.

Reviewing the arguments forwarded in the conflict, one interesting point is noticeable. The Salafis were exclusively referring to the written corpus of Islam; to the Qu'ran and the hadith. Emphasising the doctrine of tawhid, they sternly argued that the pilgrimage to Dirre Sheikh Hussein and the celebration of mawlid was against the divine message of Islam and equal to shirk. From their opponent’s side, there was hardly any mentioning of any written source. Instead, the pilgrimage and the celebration of mawlid were said to be an intrinsic part of the Oromo culture; something which had been practiced for generations. What the Salafis were bringing was a foreign teaching, alien to the Oromo culture and not suitable for the people in Bale. In other words, the two sets of arguments made were drawn from two different traditions; one referring to a divine law frozen in written form, the other to oral traditions and established customs.

Arguably, by referring to the written corpus of Islam – and applying it to the very context of religious life in Bale, the Salafis were not only bringing in new religious ideas, but they were also altering the existing perception and usage of scripture. Although the opponents called themselves Muslims, rendered the pilgrimage and the celebration of mawlid as Islamic practices, they were making references to the practice of the forefathers and established customs. This reveals a world shaped by traditions and customs – all framed within the particular locality of Bale; an Islamic locality. The sources sanctioning the legitimacy of this world were drawn from this locality. And this was exactly what the Salafis came to challenge. Referring to the book as a divine revelation, they argued that the word was to be read and understood. It did not have curative power in the form of talismans; rather it contained a readable message applicable for the actual lives of man and a corrective for religious life. Rendering literacy as important in bringing religious change, Fisher has argued that in cases where scriptures “has fallen into disuse, and an appeal to literature revives it, the result may be revolutionary” (1973: 35). Although there are certain judgemental overtones in his statement, this perspective seems fitting for the case of Bale. Underscoring a prescribed and fixed system of doctrines, and imposing it as undisputed norms, the new perception of literacy can be seen as initiating a process of rationalisation. Whereas Weber saw rationality as separating traditional religion from world religions, we here see the process of rationalisation occurring within an Islamic framework, with the emphasis of scriptures and the discharging of non-literal traditions paving the way for altered conceptions of religious explanations and changing the religious practices. “They were making Islam scientific”, one of my informant said laconically when describing the Salafis. Although the reforms the Salafis advocated would be radical enough, the fact that they remained within an Islamic tradition, with references to scriptures as their only authority, this contributed in alleviating the process of change. The inherent respect for the Islamic scriptures already held by the people, made them receptive for the scripturalist arguments. Using literacy in the sense that it “condemned the present to renew the past” (Fisher 1973: 35), the Salafi reform enabled the people to retain their
basic Muslim identity, it accommodated religious perceptions and practices, which in turn could be seen as a continued process of Islamisation.

The integration of Bale into imperial Ethiopia paved the way for the crumbling of indigenous institutions, and where the process of an accelerating modernisation during the 1950s and 1960s furthered the gradual erosion of existing cultural boundaries. Although the process of modernisation in Ethiopia should not be overestimated at this stage, its impact could best be understood as unevenly distributed, mostly affecting the emerging class of merchants in Robe. Constituting a new feature in the Oromo social structure, and frequently crossing both the spatial and cultural borders of Bale, they became more ready to question the existing religious conceptions and practices of their surroundings. Neither should Salafism be too closely linked with the process of modernisation at this particular point in history. The scale of the modern project was limited, and those introducing Salafism were not particularly exposed to this movement. On the other hand, the appearance of Salafism coinciding with the emerging process of modernisation would prove pivotal for the further development. The Emperor’s modernisation project took a decisive turn with the revolution in 1974, in which the rationalisation of society became framed within a political system of coercion and force. This development should prove crucial for the further expansion of Salafism. Yet this is a different story.

**Transforming Socio-economic Relations**

As any process of religious change, the changes occurring in Bale was marred with other spheres of human life; social, political, economical, etc. As this last part intends to argue, there was a clear relationship between religious change and socio-economic relations, in the sense that a new emerging economical structure both contributed to enhance and sustain religious change.

Similar to other Muslim communities in Ethiopia, the religious establishment in Bale depended entirely on the contributions from the population. The guardians of the shrines secured their income from the offerings of the pilgrims, the *fuqras* from the production of talismans and managing various rituals. The income of the *ulama* was drawn from voluntary contributions from the students and on income from their *waqf* land. As already indicated, many of the *ulama* of Bale remained critical to the popularised Sufi practices. Although firmly vested in the established Sufi traditions, participating in the pilgrimages, subscribing to the idea of *ziara* and interceding power of the *awliah*, they remained detached from the more excessive rituals. They would never, as many informants repeated, “load their donkeys with goods”, meaning they would not bring sacrifices (*sileta*, Arabic: *Nadhr*) to the shrines. Neither would they participate in the ecstatic dances. Rather, the time of pilgrimage was an occasion to convene with other *ulama*, to exchange books and to engage in teaching.

The socio-economic aspect of religious change in Bale becomes obvious when seeing the nature of resistance to change. The most ardent opponents to the Salafis were the guardians of the shrines and the *fuqras* who clearly saw the proposed reforms as a direct threat to their income. Similarly, the resistance from the *ulama* can be seen from the same perspective. Although critical to certain aspects of the rituals, the celebration of *mawlid* and the time of pilgrimage were important occasions were they received extra gifts either in cash or kind. Marred with the restriction produced by the social structures, and seeking to protect their status, the *ulama* knew that open criticism of the prevailing practices would turn the people against them; in turn interrupting the material
foundation for their livelihood. Although some would switch sides in the long run, the fear of losing income contributed in cementing their resistance to the new ideas.

In contrast, at the time Salafism was introduced to Bale, the existing socio-economical structure was changing, in the sense that new relationships were established. Already in the case of Sheikh Muhammed Qatiba, economical emancipation was crucial for enabling him to advocate change. Embarking on a voluntary *hijrah* to the lowland-areas, he took up farming to sustain himself, and thus avoided relying on support from his surrounding. Economically independent, he was thus in a better position to advocate change. Further, my informants claimed that the reason for Sheikh Muhammed-Amin Caffa to take up trading was to avoid being dependent on contributions from the people, in turn enabling him to voice criticism without this affecting his livelihood. More important, however, was the emergence of the class of merchants in Robe. Constituting a new economical stratum in the Oromo society, they would prove important in augmenting change. When Sheikh Abubakr and the other Salafis started to campaign for change, they were both ideologically and economically dislocated from the people. However, forming an alliance with the commercial community, they were provided with the necessary financial support. The merchants became important in assisting Sheikh Abubakr and those returning from studies in Saudi, in construction of mosques and in providing the necessary means for the establishment of the *Salafiyya Madrassa* in 1976. Their role in supporting Salafism financially thus became crucial in sustaining the movement in Bale. It should also be included that some of the returnees from Saudi received some assistance from overseas, yet this was seemingly limited and not on a regular basis. Although a relationship of dependency initially existed, the Salafis were gradually able to convert their teaching into a currency that could maintain the movement. Emphasising the linkage of “transcendental imperatives to institutions for the propagation and control of religious knowledge”, Hefner has argued that successful religious changes very much depend on the formation of institutional structures (1993: 19). In Bale it was the *Salafiyya Madrassa* that came to be this organisation. Providing employment for an increasing number of scholars returning from Saudi, it became the main arena for an emerging Salafi *ulama* regulating the Salafi doctrines and disseminating them to an increasingly wider audience. Although the madrassa to some degree was depending on contributions from the people, it soon developed a more formalised structure where income in the form of student-fees became important.

**Conclusion**

As any informed reader would have observed, we have only dealt with a short, yet formative period of the movement’s history. Developments in different localities paved the way for transcending the boundaries of these localities, in turn bringing the teaching of Salafism to Bale. As expected, the new ideas sparked controversies, yet managing to attract an audience sufficient for sustaining the ideas. Important in this process of change was the discursive relationship between agents of change and recipients, operating within various localities, and the crossing of spatial and cultural boundaries. Moreover, intrinsic to the process of change was a renewed focus on Islamic literacy

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15 This has been a highly issue among my informants, making it impossible to receive much detailed information. It seems that the Saudis were providing support through their embassy in Addis Ababa, and that some of the Salafis would travel to Addis to collect this. The actual size of the support remains undisclosed, yet it is clear that none were able to earn any wealth. It corresponds, however, with the efforts made by King Faisal at that time, actively seeking to promote Muslim communities in Africa through financial support. For more details, see Sindi. "King Faisal and Pan-Islamism."
affecting the perception of the world and new economical structures sustaining the initiated changes.

Salafism was introduced in Bale in the early 1970s. The movement survived the coercive policy of the Derg, and is today dominating the religious picture in Bale, as well as making a clear impact in other parts of the country. This fact alone would thus be a strong imperative for the study of Salafism in Ethiopia to be continued.

References