CHAPTER 8

Ethiopia: Muslims in a “Christian Nation”

Another area of Africa with an old regional identity is Ethiopia. Not so much the Ethiopia of the twentieth century, which comprised most of the horn of Africa, but the mountainous zones of the north and west, which have high rainfall and form the main watersheds of the Nile River. This smaller zone is sometimes called Abyssinia (“Habash” for Arabic speakers living in the Middle East).

In this instance the associated religious identity is Christian, not Muslim. For centuries Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, and European people have ascribed a Christian identity to the area. Ethiopia was often associated with the Prester John of medieval legend, the Christian kingdom that lived “behind” the lands of Islam and would join with European Christians in a world crusade, as discussed in Chapter 6. This ascription was not completely erroneous, for since the fourth century some Ethiopians have been Christian, in the form of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and have been writing chronicles and letters to communicate that identity.

More recently the army of Ethiopia won a signal victory against European invaders and thereby guarded their independence, whereas the rest of Africa was coming under colonial rule. Emperor Menilik’s triumph over the Italians at Adwa in 1896 won him undying fame in Africa and the African diaspora and helped to diffus the association of Ethiopia and Christianity throughout the world. So we find “Ethiopian” Christian churches, usually constituted by Africans and African Americans, all over the globe today. They are rarely Ethiopian Orthodox churches, in terms of ritual or obedience, but
they are testimony to the wide and deep association of the faith and the country.

So why am I dealing with Muslims in this “Christian” land? Do I want to tell you about troublesome Muslim minorities at the edges of this “nation”? No, I am writing about half of the population of the whole zone and their ancestors. I am even writing about a significant portion of the inhabitants of mountainous Abyssinia, going back many centuries, and about a very affective relationship between the early Muslims of Mecca and the Christian kingdom of Aksum, on the other side of the Red Sea. This narrative is harder to document than the Moroccan one, because of limited sources and the strong biases toward Christianity. But it is an important story and gets at the multicultural and multireligious identity at the heart of Ethiopia’s history.

**Christian Identity in Ethiopia**

We start with the traditional story, the emergence of Christianity in the form of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The beginnings are well documented. Aksum was the name of the capital city and a strong kingdom. It was centered in the mountains, close to the headwaters of two big branches of the Nile River, and was one of the great Nile basin states stretching from Egypt through Sudan to the Red Sea. It begins to appear in documents in the first century C.E. as a contemporary of the Roman Empire, which dominated the whole Mediterranean zone. In the fourth century C.E., not long after Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of his empire, the Aksumite Emperor Ezana converted and encouraged Christian practice in his dominions. His bishop was appointed by the leaders of the Coptic church in Alexandria, and the Coptic missionary movement became the inspiration for a similar process of evangelization in the rural areas outside of the capital. To some degree the spread of Christianity followed the same path that commentators offer for Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa (see Chapter 3): from merchant minorities to ruling classes to majority affiliation in the countryside.

The adoption of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire forced a series of assemblies of leaders to decide what “orthodoxy” should be – a question that Muslims confronted in their own history. Constantinople, which succeeded Rome as the effective capital of the empire, imposed its point of view in most of these assemblies in the
fourth and fifth centuries C.E., but could not bring a number of eastern Christian communions to adopt some of its positions. The Ethiopian church, as well as the Coptic one in Egypt, left the majority over the issue of the nature of Christ. These eastern Orthodox communities – not to be confused with the Eastern Orthodox confessions that are tied to Constantinople – took the Monophysite position that Jesus Christ was of “one nature,” not of separate divine and human natures.

The conflicts about these seemingly arcane positions were vital to the clergy and laity at the time and occasionally led to violent struggles. The main impact for our story is the relative isolation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from the dominant forms of Christianity around the Mediterranean, led by the Roman Catholic Pope and the Patriarch in Constantinople. Ethiopian Christianity developed mainly from internal sources, encouraged by the Aksum court, local monks, and missionaries. It became the official religion of Aksum and the states that succeeded it after the tenth century and the dominant practice of the peoples of Abyssinia.

Some of the Abyssinian states developed a new dimension of Ethiopian Christianity in their competition to be the “true” successor to Aksum. In a work composed over a considerable period of time and entitled the Kebre Negast, “the glory of the kings,” the church asserted origins that went back to King Solomon of Israel, about 1,000 years before Jesus’ birth. In essence, it claimed to be Christian before Christ by developing a story around the personage of Menilik I. He was the son of Solomon and Sheba, a wealthy and beautiful queen often identified with the Abyssinian highlands. Conceived in Ancient Israel, Menilik grew up with his mother in Ethiopia. He then went to Israel, seized the Ark of the Covenant and returned home. Since then the ark has resided in the Church of St. Mary of Zion in Aksum, while Ethiopian kings have called themselves descendants of Menilik. This is a Christian equivalent, admittedly more intense and embodied in an object, of the Sharifian descent claimed by the rulers of Morocco. The believers combined this attachment with an active pilgrimage to Jerusalem and a resident Ethiopian community in that city.

Early Relations of Muslims with Aksum

The Aksum empire was very involved on the Arabian peninsula. At times it controlled Yemen, the southwest corner, and its traders were
active throughout the Red Sea area. A number of Ethiopians lived in Mecca at the time of Muhammad. Some were practicing Christians, and a few became prominent in the early Muslim community. One of the latter was Bilal, whom we encountered in Chapter 4 as a slave, then a freedman who called the faithful to prayer, and finally a military officer who helped in the conquests of Syria and Iraq. I invoked Bilal as an example of the way African Muslims attached themselves to the Islamic foundations, but he is also testimony to the cosmopolitan world that prevailed in Mecca at the time of Muhammad. Most of our information about these relations comes from the Hadith, the traditions associated with the Prophet.

Shortly after Muhammad began preaching publicly and criticizing Meccan practices, he came under pressure from the leadership of the city. He began to fear for the safety of the embryonic Muslim community. On two occasions he sent groups secretly across the Red Sea to the emperor’s protection in Aksum, knowing that they would receive a good reception as fellow monotheists. A small group went in 615 C.E., and a larger group went the following year. Over 100 went in all, representing a sizable proportion of the Muslims at the time, only two to three years after the Prophet began his public preaching. Included among them were some important figures: Muhammad’s daughter Ruqayya, her husband Uthman (who would become the third caliph), Muhammad’s future wife Umm Habiba, and his cousin Jafar, the brother of Ali. The departures angered the Prophet’s opponents, who sent a delegation of their own to persuade the emperor to force the emigrants to return. Had the emperor agreed, the fortunes of Islam might have been dramatically different.

So important were these departures, and the asylum offered by Aksum, that the Hadith often refer to these events as the “first and second hijras to Abyssinia,” fully six years before the move to Medina in 622. After the migration to Medina Muhammad requested the return of the exiles, and the emperor complied quickly. Weighted down with gifts, the group arrived in 628 A.D. Among them was Umm Habiba, whose husband had converted to Christianity and stayed in Aksum. She had divorced him; now, supplied with a dowry by the emperor, she married the Prophet. A few years later she and another woman from the exile comforted Muhammad during his last days by recounting the wonders of the church in Aksum, particularly the murals of the saints.

Other Hadith go even further. Some traditions suggest that Muhammad accorded a special and inviolable state of neutrality, the Dar
al-Hiyad, to Aksum. This condition existed separately from the DAR al-Islam and the DAR al-Harb, the basic dichotomy of the Islamic world, and put Aksum “off limits” for jihad. This tradition is also formulated in a saying attributed to Muhammad: “leave the Abyssinians alone.” This was in honor of the assistance they provided to the faithful at a critical juncture in Islamic history. Another tradition maintains that Muhammad invited the emperor to convert and that he accepted and sent troops in support of the Muslim community of Medina as it struggled to take control of Mecca. The emperor hid his conversion because it was unpopular at his court.

It is impossible to appraise these less dominant strands. We can say, with some confidence, three things. First, the Aksum court provided an important refuge for the early Muslims at a critical juncture. Second, although Aksum did not lie on the main axis of Islamic expansion around the Mediterranean, it might well have been the object of Arab campaigns in the first century of Islam had Muhammad not appreciated its support in the formative years of the new religion. Finally, Muslim writers have debated the relationships between the early Islamic community and Aksum over the centuries. Those writing in a “pro-Ethiopia” vein have emphasized common Semitic identity between the Arab and northern Ethiopian peoples, the friendship of Muhammad and the Aksumite emperor, and the tolerance of the Christian court. Those writing on the opposite side have stressed the examples of Christian hostility and intolerance toward Islam dealt with later in this chapter.

Relations with Muslim Egypt

Islam spread around the Red Sea as well as the Mediterranean. Muslims – Kharijite, Shia, and Sunni – moved out along both shores and into the Horn of Africa. Many were engaged in trade, like their fellow practitioners who began to work the East Africa coast, as discussed in Chapter 3. In the Horn, however, the settlements spread more quickly into the interior, into the lowlands, and then the highlands, where the Christian state was dominant. By the sixteenth century the Muslim population of the highland areas may have constituted one third of the total population.

A number of small kingdoms, dominated by Muslims, developed in the lowlands that constitute today’s Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia
and the eastern parts of Ethiopia. The proximity of the Hijaz and Yemen, the accessibility of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, and the networks of trade between Northeast Africa and Arabia made for an early and relatively peaceful process of islamization – more quickly than in the West African Sahel and the East African coast. Many of the political and religious leaders were Arab, often with prestigious connections back to the founding days of Islam. Those who became Muslim retained their local languages and constituted the vast majority of the population. Collectively they came to be known as jabarti, a word derived from a town near Zeila where some of the first conversions took place.

Clerics trained in law and theology helped the communities understand the heritage of Islam. Many were “missionary” minded and spread the faith in lowland and highland zones alike. Some received their training at the famous Egyptian university launched by the Fatimids in the tenth century C.E., al-Azhar. It was there that the Ethiopian Muslim community maintained a hostel, called the riwaq al-jabartiyya, in support of its students. Ethiopian Muslims were closely connected to the Middle East, but none of the caliphates or larger powers put a priority on supporting the faith in their area. Islamization was a local, internal process and by and large a successful one.

The development of a Muslim presence from the coast had the effect of isolating Aksum and its successor states. At the time of the Roman Empire and the birth of Islam, the highland state was closely linked to the Mediterranean world. After about 700, these networks of contact diminished. But the Christian kingdoms remained the largest and most powerful entities in the Horn and had to deal with Muslims in three principal spheres. The lowlands were dominated by a Muslim majority in close commercial relations with the mountains. In the highlands there were significant Muslim minorities who spoke the same languages and shared much of the culture of the Christian ruling classes.

Finally, the state had to work closely with the Egyptian state to sustain its relations with the Coptic Orthodox Church. The presiding bishop in Ethiopia was appointed by the Coptic patriarch in Alexandria – a practice sustained until the 1950s! Ethiopia continued to receive missionaries, theologians, jurists, artists, and advice from its sister communion. It was critical for both church and state to maintain civil relations with the Fatimids, then the Mamluk regime, and finally the Ottomans – in short with whichever authority controlled Egypt. Occasionally the Ethiopians threatened to divert the waters of
the Nile, which formed the basis of Egyptian survival, to extract concessions from Cairo, but most of the time the relations were correct and cordial.

Crusade and Jihad: Confrontations in Ethiopia

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Solomonic kingdom expanded into the lowlands and established control over the port of Massawa on the Red Sea, much like its predecessor Aksum. The emperors adopted a rhetoric not unlike that of the European Crusaders of Chapter 6. They viewed the Muslims as enemies and inferiors, exacted tribute from several states, and forced some conversions. For their part the Muslims, accustomed to independence and proud of the achievements of Islam, sought to resist. The stage was set for the confrontation that many historians have taken as typical of the relations between Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia.

The Ottoman expansion into Egypt, Arabia, and the Red Sea zone in the early sixteenth century was a precondition for the expansion of local Muslim communities. The Turks did not, however, supply many weapons or soldiers or sustain a great interest in establishing an Islamic dominion in Ethiopia. The impetus to resist and exact revenge came from local Muslim leaders and a few new arrivals from the Arabian peninsula. One Muslim cleric, steeped in the law and able to inspire men and women to unite and fight, was able to put together a winning coalition.

Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim Gran led his followers to victory after victory in the center of “Christian” Ethiopia between 1527 and 1543. His biographer suggests the sources of his charisma and courage as follows:

One night while I was sleeping (said one of Ahmad’s contemporaries), I saw the Prophet with, on his right, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (the first caliph), and to his left Umar ibn al-Khattab (the second caliph), and in front of him Ali ibn Abu Talib (the fourth caliph), may God be satisfied with them. In front of Ali was the Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim. “Prophet of God, I asked, who is in front of Ali ibn Abu Talib?” He answered me: “It is he by whom God Most High will establish order in Abyssinia.”

The Muslim armies marched into Aksum and the other major capitals of the highlands. They converted churches to mosques, destroyed
some “idols” of the Christians, forced some Christians to convert to Islam, and confiscated grain, cattle, and other provisions. They did everything but capture the emperor himself. The Muslim rhetoric was equal to that used by the Christians during their expansion: their opponents were infidels, polytheists, and worshipers of Mary.

As quickly as they intruded, they left. The armies of the Solomonic regime defeated and killed the militant leader. They reestablished their domination over most of Ethiopia as Gran’s coalition collapsed. Throughout the struggle the Christians kept Massawa on the Red Sea, not far from the old Aksumite port of Adulis. This permitted them to receive Portuguese aid against the Gran offensive, but then to establish diplomatic relations with Ottoman representatives in the late sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century the Ottomans even helped them get rid of the Portuguese Jesuits, who had treated Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in a very condescending manner.

The confrontations of the Solomonic dynasties and Ahmad Gran are etched into the memory of Christians and Muslims alike as the dominant metaphor of relations between the two confessions. Ahmad’s campaigns did threaten the integrity of the Christian state and drove it into alliance with Portuguese missionaries and military advisors. But the Solomonic rulers then formed enduring relations with the Ottomans, who were ready to accept the religious status quo in Ethiopia and encourage the growth of trade. The fervor of both Christians and Muslims waned. “Christian” warlords fell to fighting each other. The militancy and unity of the Muslims declined, while the Oromo people migrated in large numbers into the central portions of the country. Initially the Oromo cared little about either faith.

It is tempting to see reverse parallels between the histories of Morocco and Ethiopia. In each “nation-state” one confession was dominant in the interior over long periods of time and was threatened from the coastal zone by its rival. But this analogy fails to capture the differences. In the Moroccan case Portuguese and Spanish Christians attacked the regime from outside, and the sultans were able to mobilize believers throughout the zone. The Christians had no significant support inside the kingdom. In the Ethiopian case the highland state and church had to deal with indigenous Muslim movements whose strength was inside – in the lowlands but also in Abyssinia itself. Ethiopia had a civil war, where each side evoked a militant tradition – crusade or jihad.
Islamization and New Confrontations

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the fortunes of the Muslim societies of the lowlands and the center began to revive. Agricultural production prospered, and this led to increased exports to the coast. This in turn intensified the commercial networks around the Red Sea and with Egypt, the frequency of the pilgrimage, and the settlement of Arab traders and clerics near the coast. The new vehicle for islamization was Sufism, particularly in the form of orders that identified with Sunni orthodoxy and emphasized the importance of learning.

A good example of this process was Shaikh Muhammad Shafi (1743–1806). He was from the area of Wallo, in the center of Ethiopia, and began his life as a student of law, theology, and the Arabic language in one of the local schools. His teacher initiated him into the Qadiriyya Sufi order and authorized him to initiate others. Shaikh Muhammad gradually acquired a committed following and reputation for learning, saintliness, and the performance of miracles. He was on civil terms with the leaders of the small political chiefdoms of Wallo, many of whom were Muslim, but he stayed away from their courts. When he made the pilgrimage and sought authorization for waging the military jihad, he got little support from the Meccan authorities.

Shaikh Muhammad finally settled on a mountain ridge at a place called Jama Negus, “the community of the king,” because of the size and militancy of his following. It was there that he instituted the annual celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, attended by Muslims from all over Ethiopia. He also created a division of the year for his disciples: for four months they would emphasize teaching and learning; they would devote the next months to the extension of Islam by jihad and take the final third of the year for prayer, meditation, and Sufi devotional exercises. It was clerics in the mold of Shaikh Muhammad who anchored, revived, and spread the faith during this period.

Muslims were numerous in many parts of Ethiopia during the nineteenth century (see Figure 15). The practice of Islam was not limited to clerical or trading groups, but could also be found among ruling classes, farmers, and pastoralists. Some Muslims continued to use cults of possession and sacrifice, but leaders like Shaikh Muhammad exhorted them to change. Some of the ruling classes belonged to “mixed” families, with relatives who practiced Christianity. Clerics of both persuasions actively sought conversion to their confessions.
FIGURE 15 A painting of the diverse Muslim populations of Ethiopia in the “traditional” style by Adamu Tesfar, 2001. Collection of Al and Polly Roberts.
The Orthodox church and the highland state continued to push the connection between Christianity and Ethiopian identity.

In the late nineteenth century three talented and ambitious men succeeded in centralizing the old domains of Abyssinia and expanding into the frontiers we associate with the Ethiopia of the twentieth century (see Map 5). Tewodros II (reigned from 1855 to 1867), Yohannes IV (reigned from 1872 to 1889), and Menilik II (reigned from 1889 to 1909) brought highlands, lowlands, and other lands together at considerable cost to the Muslim communities. In an 1862 letter to Queen Victoria, Tewodros revealed his vision of himself and Ethiopia:

My fathers, the Emperors, having forgotten the Creator, He [God] handed their kingdom to the Gallas [Oromo] and the Turks. But God created me, lifted me out of the dust, and restored the Empire to my rule. He endowed me with power, and enabled me to stand in the place of my fathers. By this power I drove away the Gallas. As for the Turks, I have told them to leave the land of my ancestors. They refuse. I am going now to wrestle with them.

The “Turks” of Tewodros were, in fact, the indigenous Muslims of the lowland and highland zones.

The three emperors, supported by the head of the Orthodox church, embarked on campaigns of expansion that often took the form of crusades. They were challenged by Egyptian expansion along the Red Sea and up the Nile, followed by the Mahdist threat (see Chapter 12). They coerced conversions, confiscated property, destroyed Muslim centers, massacred thousands of believers, and drove even more to take flight. Their rhetoric and actions equaled the Solomonic expansion of earlier centuries. Yohannes was the most active in the pursuit of Christianization (see Chapter 12 on his conflicts with the Mahdist state of the Sudan, which resulted in his death), whereas Menilik restored freedom of religious practice after seeing the devastation of the 1880s. But all three drank deeply at the well of the Christian identity of Ethiopia. Their pressures forced the Muslim leaders to concentrate more on the survival of the faith than the processes of islamization set in motion since the late eighteenth century.

Menilik developed his administration of Ethiopia in the center, in the province of Shewa just south of Wallo, and concentrated his efforts at modernization from a new capital in Addis Ababa. After he suffered a debilitating stroke in 1909, the crown council selected a regent and an heir-designate, Lij Iyasu (1896–1935, reigned from 1913 to 1916).
He was the grandson of the emperor and the son of the governor and general Ras Mikael, whose name was Muhammad Ali before his forced conversion in the 1870s. Mikael was now the powerful governor of Wollo, with a large army to support his son’s claim to the crown.

Although it is sometimes said that Lij Iyasu was a Muslim or converted to Islam, it is more likely that he envisioned a government in which Muslims and Christians would share the leadership as they often had in his home province. But Iyasu had little experience in the complex politics of Ethiopia or the processes of modernization set in motion by Menilik. He did not have the ability to run the regime, much less bring his pluralistic perspective into being.

The pressures of World War I proved his undoing. On the domestic front he integrated members of some of the Muslim dynasties into his administration. On the international front he sought alliance with
Sayyid Muhammad Abdullah, a resistor against British and Italian rule in Somalia, and made overtures to the Central Powers. He maintained close contacts with Mazhar Bey, the first official Ottoman envoy in Ethiopia. Consul Mazhar worked out of Harar, the prestigious Islamic city in the east, and encouraged Lij Iyasu to believe that an Ottoman victory would push Italy out of its colonies and allow further Ethiopian expansion.

Britain, France, and Italy protested to the foreign ministry of Addis Ababa, while church and political leaders began to mobilize against Iyasu from inside. In September 1916 a crown council excommunicated him from the church and deposed him from the throne. The next month Ras Mikael was defeated by the forces that the council had mobilized. Ras Tafari, the future Haile Sellassie, was appointed as heir-designate, alongside the regent and daughter of Menilik, Empress Zawditu. The “Christian” identity of the court was reaffirmed and relations with the Allies were restored. Iyasu fled into exile.

Muslims and the Italian Occupation

The Italian government did not easily forget its defeat at the hands of Menilik in 1896. It retained the two colonies adjacent to Ethiopia – Eritrea and Somalia. Both had majority Muslim populations, and the Italians developed their propaganda as a “Muslim power” in much the way the French did in Morocco. When they completed their conquests of Muslim societies in Africa by conquering Libya in 1911, they made the following declaration to their subjects:

Remember that God said in the Book [the Quran]: “To those who come in peace and do not drive you out of your country, you must work for the good and protect them, because God loves those who do good and who protect [religion].” Remember also that it is written in the Book: “If others are prepared to propose peace, you should accept it and have confidence in God.”

... Italy wishes for peace. Under the protection of Italy and its king, may God bless your land and may it remain the Dar al-Islam over which the Italian flag will float as a sign of faith, love and hope.

The Italian colonial administrations were a constant irritant to the Ethiopian regime, with its memories of access to the Red Sea in Eritrea and influence in the Ogaden in Somalia. Ras Tafari maintained the
same opposition to the Italian presence articulated by Lij Iyasu while seeking international protection through membership in the League of Nations. But the erstwhile European allies did little to prevent Benito Mussolini and the Fascist forces from attacking Ethiopia in 1935. A modernized and efficient army “erased” the memory of the Adwa defeat. Supported by airplanes and poison gas, it moved inland from Eritrea and Somalia. By the spring of the following year it controlled the country. Ras Tafari, now Emperor Haile Sellassie, went into exile in Britain while a guerilla movement continued a futile struggle inside the country. The occupation continued into World War II, until London coordinated African and European forces of liberation and put the emperor back on the throne.

The Italian conquerors used their experience as a “Muslim power” and their sense of the “misfortunes” of Muslim Ethiopians in their brief administration of the country. Mussolini portrayed himself as the friend of Islam, much as Napoleon had done in Egypt. He built mosques, appointed Muslim judges, organized radio broadcasts in Arabic, and sponsored pilgrimages to Mecca. He coordinated efforts with campaigns against the Christian monarchy in some Arabic newspapers of the Middle East and Europe. His chief collaborator was a Lebanese journalist and author based in Geneva, Shakib Arslan (1869–1946). In 1935, just before the invasion, Arslan wrote the following:

All those who would like to defend Ethiopia have first to read about its history and particularly regarding the Muslims living there and what they received from the Ethiopians. They will see that apart from the Muslims of Spain no other Muslim people has suffered over the centuries such atrocities as the Muslims of Ethiopia. We do not even talk about maltreatment in the early ages, of which we have historical records. We talk about events that took place in the not too distant past. It is enough to refer to what happened sixty to seventy years ago, in the time of Emperor Yohannes, and mention the number of means he used against the Muslims that were forced to become Christians.

Arslan continued his campaign, with Italian support, in the newspapers of Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt in the following years. He buttressed his case by citing the instances of hostility over the centuries. History was a battleground for perspectives on relations between Christians and Muslims, Jews and Arabs, and Europe and the Middle East.

The long-term effect of Italian practices and Arab propaganda was to intensify the ambiguous relationship that had long existed between
Muslim societies and the Abyssinian and Ethiopian states. The ambiguity continued well after the restoration of the constitutional monarchy in 1941. At his coronation in 1930 Haile Sellassie had taken on all of the trappings of the Solomonic tradition. He was the “Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah” in the tradition of Menilik I and Menilik II. Now he had been restored to the throne and informal leadership of the Orthodox church, with great celebration inside the country and throughout the world. He had strong ambivalence about Islam and the role that some leaders had played during the Italian occupation, although he remained pragmatic in his practices toward his Muslim subjects.

Haile Sellassie was deposed by the military in 1974. They severed the link between cross and crown, but neither Muslims nor Christians fared well under their highly centralized and secular regime. They were overthrown in 1991 and replaced by a government with a pluralistic approach to culture. Under these conditions the fortunes of Muslim communities seem to be reviving, both in Ethiopia and Eritrea, which declared its independence from the larger country in 1993. Figure 15 is a contemporary painting suggesting the great diversity of the faithful across the region.

Further Reading


For an analysis of the “Abyssinian” tradition of early Islam, see the Sellassie reference and W. M. Watt’s *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford Clarindon Press, 1953). Both draw heavily on the hadith (see Chapter 2) collected by Ibn Ishaq and edited by Ibn Hisham, which can be found in an English translation by A. Guillaume entitled *Life of Muhammad* (Lahore, Pakistan, 1955).

For the story of the Muslim communities of Ethiopia, a good recent introduction is the article by Lidwien Kapteijns in Levitzon and Pouwels’ *The History*
of Islam. A useful study of islamization in Wollo is Hussein Ahmed’s *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wollo, Ethiopia: Revival, Reform and Reaction* (Brill, 2001). Haggai Erlich gives an interesting Middle Eastern and Israeli perspective on Ethiopia, the practice of Islam, and relations with the Middle East in *Ethiopia and the Middle East* (Lynne Rienner, 1994). The citations from Tewodros’ letter of 1862 and Arslan in 1935 come from Erlich.