

Annales d'Éthiopie

የኢትዮጵያ ዓመታዊ መጽሔት

Revue internationale sur la Corne de l'Afrique

N° 30

Année 2015

Centre français des études éthiopiennes
Éditions de Boccard

Meron Zeleke*, Silvia Bruzzi**

Women, Gender and Religions in Ethiopia

Femmes, genre et religions en Ethiopie

Following the second wave of feminism in the mid-1960s, religion tended to attract less attention among feminist researchers. Only a small group of feminist scholars were dealing by the late 1970s with the androcentric bias in religious studies and the injustices of male-dominated religions. For the last three and a half decades, gender has been among the most popular topics in the social-scientific study of religion around the globe. Gender—as “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes” and a “way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott, 1986)—has become an area of research of religious studies with a wave of new and innovative perspectives. A review of the literature on religious studies shows a wide range of topics such as the social relations between the sexes, the categories of feminine and masculine, the processes of construction of femininity and masculinity, sexual norms and the social roles prescribed to women and men in a society (Walter & Davie, 1998).

One of the first widely addressed themes is the issue of the nature of religiosity of men and women, raising the question of who tends to be “more religious” and what factors account for that. In this debate, Miller and Hoffmann (1995) and Stark (2002) are among the first to have shifted away from asking why women are more religious than men, to asking why men are less religious than women. However, the essentialist category of women has been questioned, pointing out that women are opposed to each other like men, through their different affiliations of class, age, ethnicity, beliefs or sexuality, and that they can also be agents in the religious field (Rochefort, 2007: 12-13).

* Adjunct assistant professor of Social Anthropology at Addis Ababa University; postdoctoral fellow and recipient of Volkswagen Foundation research grant. Contact: eressokiyya@gmail.com. ** Associate researcher at Institut des mondes africains (IMAF, UMR 8171), Paris. Contact: silviabruzzi@yahoo.it.

The interrelations between gender, religion and power have led scholars to question whether religion perpetuates traditional gender roles and inequality (e.g., Richardson, 1988). Others studies have explored women's roles within religious organizations, with special attention to existing gender bias regarding women's religious leadership (e.g., Ebaugh, Lorence & Chafetz, 1996).

Gendered socialization is described as an inherent factor affecting the lower representation of women heading religious establishments (Cornwall, 1988). Others have stressed how women can enhance female self-awareness, solidarity and mutual support within "marginal" religious communities and spaces, such as sanctuaries and shrines (Mernissi, 1977). The nexus of religion, gender, identity, human rights and politics is another subject that has been observed in different parts of the globe. This includes exploring women's equal right to freedom of religion, and women's power and position within religious institutions (Shaheen Sardar Ali, 2000; Jonas, 2000).

As Florence Rochefort points out, the interplay between the political and religious spheres is crucial in the social-cultural construction and organization of gender roles. Religions contribute to fostering gender ideologies that are linked to cultural heritage, political and moral values, as well as to forms of authority and hierarchy. Women are more explicitly constrained by these dynamics, as "they are seen as embodying national, family and religious ideas, as well as main agents for the transmission of values and for the control of civil society by forms of male domination." Also men who are the main beneficiaries of such social norms are themselves subject to gender constraints, "especially when they do not meet the prevailing standards of masculinity and heterosexuality" (Rochefort, 2007: 12-13).

Religious phenomena have contributed to the questioning of pivotal theoretical concepts in gender studies, including that of agency. Drawing from her ethnographical study on women's participation in the Islamic revival movement, Saba Mahmood has suggested, for example, a different definition of agency "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2001).

Ethiopian historiography on women, gender and religions is minimal and fragmentary; it sheds light mainly on women's history and rarely on gender dynamics. Christian queens and saints are at the core of these studies and represent an important contribution in filling a gap in Ethiopian history, which was mainly written from the male point of view (Böll, 2003; Belete Bizuneh, 2001; Selamawit Mecca, 2006, 2009; Wion, 2012). Women's participation in traditional religions, however, has rarely been approached, mainly with a focus on female leadership (Olmstead, 1997).

It has been noticed that both Christian and Muslim hagiographies tend to underrepresent women saints (Selamawit Mecca, 2006; Bruzzi, 2011; Meron Zeleke, 2015), and that the literary production at large overshadows women subjects in the historical process. Instead, oral literature, embodiment practices and everyday religious practices play a crucial role in handing down women's knowledge and agency in the religious sphere (Bruzzi & Meron Zeleke, 2015).

In 2002, Cressida Marcus devoted a special issue of the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* to gender and Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* Christianity. While observing how ritual practices are divided along on gender-based lines, contributors agreed in acknowledging the domination of men in formal ritual practices and the marginalization of women in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. In this vein, studies analyzed social and historical processes of the construction of femininity (Wright, 2002) and masculinity (Persoon, 2002; Fisseha Tadesse, 2002; Bromber, 2007) in the Christian Orthodox Church. Other studies focused instead on gender dynamics related to Christian and Islamic sainthood (Gibb, 2000; Marcus, 2002).

The present special issue addresses the anthropological and historical analysis of the relation and intersection of gender and religion mainly in Ethiopia, but with a case study also on Eritrea. The relation, confrontation and intersection of gender and religion is analyzed with a focus on women, taking into consideration the multiple and changing manifestations of religion in the diverse social and cultural contexts of the region. The authors reflect critically on gender in its interpretative and imaginative dimensions and as a fundamental principle of social ordering and a socially constructed phenomenon. To do so, a plurality of sources, methodologies and approaches are employed.

The questions addressed by the different contributions in this special issue focus on such issues as: what are the various roles women play in different religious establishments? How is the social construction of gender portrayed in the different religious landscapes of the region? How is religiosity expressed in the everyday lives of women? The contributions point out how well-established gender roles can alternatively be imposed, supported, negotiated, subverted or contested in religious practices and discourses which otherwise are thought to be independent domains not affected by non-spiritual worldviews. Most of the existing literature on women's agency in Ethiopian and Eritrean religious contexts consists of anthropological studies addressing women's everyday forms of religion. Available ethnographic works hint at the discourse of authenticity and how gender is acted out in the debates of religious orthodoxy (Meron Zeleke, 2013).

The direct and indirect role of religion in gender-based violence is another important topic addressed by scholars (Hirut Terefe, 2002). Several works

have focused on feminine participation and role in spirit possession cults such as *zar* and the prominent role women have in this cult (Lewis, 1982; Meron Zeleke, 2013; Ishihara, 2013; Kiya Gezahegn, 2013; Dore, 2007). According to Lewis, spirit possession is a type of weapon that allows women to maintain or improve their social position in the context of a “sex war.” In this understanding, women, who represent an important example of marginal, ill-treated individuals, would challenge their social role by becoming members of “peripheral” spirit possession cults (Lewis & Wilson, 1967).

Zar is also considered to be a healing cult that empowers individuals, mainly women, through a kind of group therapy (Messing, 1958; Vecchiato, 1993; Boddy, 1988). In Sudan, Janice Boddy has focused on the feminine body of a possessed medium as the site of a struggle out of which a subaltern discourse and gender relations are expressed, and in which through trances, women have the opportunity to claim the action space that is otherwise denied them in their everyday lives. Concerns and anxieties about reproductive diseases that might lead to divorce or polygamy are relieved by resorting to *zar*. Collective treatment ceremonies mobilize women’s support groups without threatening the accepted male social order. Through spirit possession, with the support of foreign bodies from a parallel, yet separate world, women can reaffirm, criticize and reinterpret cultural values while avoiding the shame that would otherwise be brought on them by abandonment of traditional values. In this way, human conflicts are reconciled. According to the author, while possession cannot relieve women’s chronic state of subordination, it clearly can act to cultivate their own female self-awareness (Boddy, 1989).

The relationship between possession cults and power also merits special attention. It has been suggested that possession cults express an embedded critique of colonial hegemonies—whether national or global—whose effects are felt deeply, although not exclusively, by women, and that in this sense, cults historically represent expressions of cultural resistance and counter-hegemonic narratives. Embedded in local contexts as they are, cults provide a means of understanding, supporting or challenging modern life, religion, capitalism and colonial hegemonies (Boddy, 1994).

Minako Ishihara’s contribution to this volume provides fascinating insights into both spirit possession in Ethiopia and women’s agency within Sufi orders, especially by providing an ethnographical case that can be compared with studies available on women’s role within the Tījāniyya in West Africa (Hutson, 1999; Gemmeke, 2009). By exploring how women took part in the Tījāniyya Sufi order in Ethiopia, she focuses on the *rūḥāniyas* (spiritual beings) who stand as religious masters to the mainly feminine spirit mediums in a master-disciple relationship. Women mediums are guided by the spirit to “the right path.” In this way, women’s embodiment practices are an integral part of the process of conversion to Islam and a way to hand down Sufi religious teachings and

values. However, as spirit mediums, women can avoid traditional duties within the domestic sphere, subverting the prescribed social role usually assigned to them.

Both Minako Ishihara's and Valentina Fusari's papers shed light on women's agency in religious establishments and their role in religious proselytization, countering the marginalization thesis that rather assigns women a subordinate place as agents in religious establishments. Drawing from Comboni Missionary Sisters' Private Archives and ethnodemographic methods, Valentina Fusari focuses on female missionaries in Eritrea, usually marginalized agents in the literature on Christian missions in former Italian colonies. As agent of evangelization of the family and society, active in education, health and pastoral care, and material assistance of women, the Missionary Sisters conducted their activities among male-dominated social institutions and played social roles in Eritrea that in Italy were still reserved to men.

Ethiopian figures of pious women tend to be only rarely reported in historical written sources, where they are considered mainly in their roles as wives, daughters or mothers. Margaux Herman approaches the issue in a new perspective, shedding light on symbolic representations of the king and royal family as they are celebrated in the historiography of the court. Interestingly, she observes how female religious figures are deployed as a religious model of Christianity in order to sacralize the royal dignity. Ethiopian Christian kings preserved, exalted, celebrated and associated with their image also female symbols, including historical and mythical figures and cults such as those of the ancient classical Roman Empress Helena and the Virgin Mary. Herman thus suggests how these dynamics paved the way to the Ethiopian Christian queens' participation in the political sphere and how these women of the Court, such as Queen Eleni of the 15th century, revived and associated with themselves the memory of female symbols of the past for their political empowerment.

Tsehai Berhane-Selassie and Angela M. Müller's contribution presents the experiences of young women patients seeking healing services at the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwähädo* Church (EOTC) holy water sites. Going beyond a description of the ritual process of healing in the EOTC, it illustrates the lived experiences of the female patients including the abusive and abrasive behaviors of some healers and the lack of control over the ritual process by the church authorities. Discrimination against women in everyday religious experiences is stressed by their exclusion from the healing professions and from assisting in religious practices like the healing with holy water.

Thera Mjaaland's article analyzes the impact of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church on the processes of social reproduction and contraception. Drawing on her ethnographic study in north-western Tigray in North-Ethiopia, she

explores the complex issue of the influence of religion on the use of reproductive technologies and questions the widespread assumption that religiosity and contraceptive use are necessarily antithetical.

As can be seen from the five contributions, the authors come from different academic disciplines, thus stimulating a fresh interdisciplinary perspective on discussing gender and religion. The different backgrounds of the respective authors provide a mix of viewpoints and experiences that will promote better brainstorming in the ongoing research on gender issues in Ethiopia, a theme still marginalized to a large extent. All these studies contribute to our understanding of women's agency especially within the major monotheistic religions of Ethiopia, Orthodox Christianity and Islam. The issue of masculinity remains quite unexplored and deserves more attention so as other Ethiopian vernacular religions. Through the lens of gender dynamics, examining religious phenomena has the striking power of enabling scholars to approach Ethiopian societies and history from a wide range of directions.

Bibliography

- BELETE Bizunch, 2001, Women in Ethiopian History: A Bibliographic Review, *Northeast African Studies*, 8 (3), 2001, 7-32.
- BODDY J., 1988, Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan: The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance, *American Ethnologist*, 15 (1), 4-27.
- BODDY J., *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.
- BODDY J., 1994, Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23, 407-434.
- BÖLL V., 2003, Holy Woman in Ethiopia, in Hirsch B. & Kropp M. (ed.), *Saints, Biographies and History in Africa*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 31-45.
- BROMBER K., 2007, Muscular Christianity. The Role of the Ethiopian YMCA Sports in Shaping "Modern" Masculinities (1950s-1970s), *Studies of the Department of African Languages and Cultures*, 47, 29-44.
- BRUZZI S., 2011, Una medicina per l'Anima: sante e confraternite sufi in Africa orientale, in Nicolini B. & Taddia I. (ed.), *Il Corno d'Africa Tra Medicina, politica e storia*, Roma, Novalogos, 167-185.
- BRUZZI S., 2015, Femmes, images et pouvoir en contexte colonial : Le cas de l'Érythrée dans l'entre-deux-guerres, in Gomez-Perez M. (ed.), *Femmes, génération et agency en Afrique subsaharienne : vers de nouveaux défis*, Paris, Kharthala.
- BRUZZI S. & MERON Zeleke, 2015, Contested Religious Authority: Sufi Women in Ethiopia and Eritrea, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 45 (1), 37-67.
- CERULLI E., 1946, Gli Atti di Zena Maryam, monaca etiopica del secolo XIV, *Rivista di Studi Orientali*, 21, 121-156.

- CORNWALL M., 1988, The Influence of Three Agents of Religious Socialization, in Darwin T. (ed.), *The Religion and Family Connection*, Provo, Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 207-231.
- DORE G., 2007, "Chi non ha una parente andinna?". Donne e possessione come archivio storico ed esperienza dell'alterità tra i Kunama d'Eritrea, *Ethnorêma*, 3, 45-88.
- EBAUGH H. R., LORENCE J. & CHAFETZ J. S., 1996, The Growth and Decline of the Population of Catholic Nuns Cross-Nationally, 1960-1990: A Case of Secularization as Social Structural Change, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 35, 171-183.
- FISSEHA Tadesse, 2002, The Representation of Jesus: Reflecting Attitudes of Masculinity in the Ethiopian Theological Tradition, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 35 (1), 67-87.
- GEMMEKE A., 2009, Marabout Women in Dakar: Creating Authority in Islamic Knowledge, *Africa*, 79 (1), 128-147.
- GIBB C., 2000, Negotiating Social and Spiritual Worlds: The Gender of Sanctity in a Muslim City in Africa, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 16 (2), 24-42.
- HANNING A., 2014, Spirituality Border Crossings: Childbirth, Postpartum Seclusion and Religious Alterity in Amhara, Ethiopia, *Africa*, 84 (2), 294-313.
- HERSTAD B., 2009, *The Role of Religious Communities in Addressing Gender-based Violence and HIV*, Washington, DC, Futures Group, Health Policy Initiative, Task Order I.
- HIRUT Terefe, 2002, Violence against Women from Gender and Cultural Perspective, *Reflections: Documentation of the Forum on Gender*, 7, 1-12.
- HUTSON A. S., 1999, The Development of Women's Authority in the Kano Tijaniyya, 1894-1963, *Africa Today*, 46 (3), 43-64.
- ISHIHARA M., 2013, The Formation of Trans-Religious Pilgrimage Centers in South-east Ethiopia: Sitti Mumina and the Faraqasa Connection, in Desplat P. & Østebø T. (ed.), *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism*, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 91-114.
- KIYA Gezahegn, 2013, *The Efficacy of Benediction and Prayer among the Amhara Society: An Anthropological Study of the Religious Rituals of 'erfo mereba' and 'shenecha' around Raya Qobo Wereda of Northern Wollo Regional Zone*, MA thesis, Addis Ababa University.
- LEWIS H., 1982, Spirit Possession in Ethiopia: An Essay in Interpretation, in Rubenson S. (ed.), *Proceeding of the 7th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Lund, University of Lund, 105-124.
- LEWIS I. M. & WILSON P. J., 1967, Spirit Possession and the Sex War, *Man New Series*, 2 (4), 626-629.
- MAHMOOD S., 2001, Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival, *Cultural Anthropology*, 16 (2), 202-236.

- MARCUS C., 2001, The Production of Patriotic Spirituality: Ethiopian Orthodox Women's Experience of War and Social Crisis, *Northeast African Studies*, 8 (3), 179-208.
- MARCUS C., 2002, In Praise of Women: The Veneration of the Virgin Mary in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 35 (1), 9-26.
- MERNISSI F., 1977, Women, Saints, and Sanctuaries, *Signs*, 3 (1), 101-112.
- MERON Zeleke, 2010, *The Mother and the Bread Winner: The Socio Economic Role and Status of Gumuz Women*, Munster, Lit Verlag.
- MERON Zeleke, 2013, The Gendering Discourse in the Debates of Religious Orthodoxy, in Desplat P. & Østebø T. (ed.), *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism*, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 115-136.
- MERON Zeleke, 2015, *Faith at the Crossroads: Religious Syncretism and Dispute Settlement in Northern Ethiopia*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag.
- MESSING S. D., 1958, Group Therapy and Social Status in the Zar Cult of Ethiopia, *American Anthropologist*, 60 (6), 1120-1126.
- MILLER A. S., & HOFFMANN J. P., 1995, Risk and Religion: An Explanation of Gender Differences in Religiosity, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34, 63-75.
- OLMSTEAD J., 1997, *Woman between Two Worlds: Portrait of an Ethiopian Rural Leader*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press.
- PANKHURST H., 1992, *Gender, Development and Identity: An Ethiopian Study*, London, Zed Books Ltd.
- PAPI M. R., 1943, Una santa abissina anticattolica Walatta-Pe*tros, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, 3 (1), 87-93.
- PERSOON J., 2002, The Ethiopian Monk: A Changing Concept of Masculinity, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 35 (1), 43-65.
- PROUTY R. C., 1986, *Empress Taytu and Menilek II: Ethiopia 1883-1910*, Trenton, The Red Sea Press.
- QASHU L., 2007, The Individual and the Group in the Songs of Arsi Oromo Men, *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 23, 115-133.
- RAHEL Shiferaw, 2007, Religion and Peace: The Experience of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekaneyesus in Building Positive Peace in Ethiopia, MA thesis, Addis Ababa University.
- RICHARDSON L., 1988, *The Dynamics of Sex and Gender: A Sociological Perspective*, New York, Harper & Row.
- ROCHEFORT F. (ed.), 2007, *Le pouvoir du genre. Laïcités et religions 1905-2005*, Toulouse, PUM.
- RUBINKOWSKA H., 2007, Women in Power Élite of the Ethiopian Empire, *Hemispheres. Studies on Cultures and Societies*, 22, 87-97.

- SARTORI I., 2007-2008, *Gey fäqär*, the Songs of the City: Voices of Tradition and Transition in Harar, *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 23, 135-151.
- SARTORI I., 2010, Women and Children's Religious Repertoires in and around Harar. Paper presented at the International Interdisciplinary Workshop "The Roles and Values of Menzuma", Institute of Ethiopian Studies.
- SCOTT J., 1986, Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis, *American Historical Review*, 91 (5), 1053-1075.
- SELAMAWIT Mecca, 2006, Hagiographies of Ethiopian Female Saints: With Special Reference to Gädlä Krestos Sämrä and Gädlä Feqertä Krestos, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 18 (2), 153-167.
- SELAMAWIT Mecca, 2009, Women in Ethiopic Hagiographies, in Ege S., Aspen H., Birhanu Teferra & Shiferaw Bekele (ed.), *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Trondheim, 1365-1374.
- SHAHEEN Sardaf Ali, 2000, *Gender and Human Rights in Islam and International Law. Equal Before Allah. Unequal Before Man?*, The Hague, Kluwer Law International.
- STARK R., 2002, Physiology and Faith: Addressing the 'Universal' Gender Difference in Religious Commitment, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41, 495-507.
- SVENSSON J., 2000, *Women's Human Rights and Islam: A Study of Three Attempts at Accommodation*, Lund, Lund University.
- VAN DE LOO J., 1987, *Guji Oromo Culture in Southern Ethiopia: Religious Capabilities in Rituals and Songs*, Berlin, Dietrich Reimer Verlag.
- VECCHIATO N. L., 1993, Illness, Therapy, and Change in Ethiopian Possession Cults, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 63 (2), 176-196.
- WALTER T. & DAVIE G., 1998, The Religiosity of Women in the Modern West, *British Journal of Sociology*, 49, 640-660.
- WION A., 2012, *Paradis pour une reine. Le monastère de Qoma Fasilädäs, Éthiopie, XVII^e siècle*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne.
- WRIGHT M. C., 2002, At the Limits of Sexuality: The Femininity of Ethiopian Orthodox Nuns, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 35 (1), 27-42.