

Writing Religious History

The Historiography of Ethiopian Pentecostalism

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Preface

I stood and watched as the Pentecostal healing service simply erupted with noise. So far, I had witnessed much singing, testimonies by different people, prayers for healing, violent exorcisms, and a sermon of forty-five minutes. But now, roughly four and a half hours after the meeting had begun, the noise and worship intensity reached an unprecedented level in what was a simultaneous mass prayer prompted by the worship leader. As a Western observer unaccustomed to such long services and tired from sitting on an uncomfortable bench I had long since grown weary, but not so the people around me. I carefully peeked at my surroundings—a small fraction of the close to 4,000 worshipers that I could observe. A few stood subdued, bowed forward and mumbling prayers in Amharic. Others loudly prayed in tongues, with their heads tilted back and their eyes closed. Still others, as if combating invisible forces, regularly underscored their prayers with a karate-like hand movement and a forcefully uttered “bä iyäsus śim!”¹ A number of worshipers around me quivered and shook violently, some lost their balance and fell back onto their benches. One woman not far from me ecstatically rolled her head in fast motion until she lost consciousness. The leader of the mass prayer fueled this atmosphere by shouting “iyäsus geta näw!”² and his cry was echoed by many participants. Nobody seemed to be bothered by the intense noise, not even the babies I saw around me, huddled up to their mothers. As I stood there in the Ketena Hulet Full Gospel Church, observing this energy and vibrancy among the worshipers, I realized that Pentecostalism had come to Ethiopia to stay.

This introduction to my thesis might qualify as another instance of a well-established trope that Clifford Geertz has called “Being There” in his astute analysis of anthropological writings.³ According to Geertz, “Being There” narratives assert the authorship and the authority of an anthropological work by pointing to the writer’s physical presence “there” at a given point in time. They “author-ize” a text by visibly inserting the author into the text in distinction to the researched group, they ground his competence in asserting his physical “Being There,” and by nonchalantly oscillating between his visual sensations and thoughtful musings they suggest that anyone who would have “Been There,” would have seen and felt the same. My opening followed the same pattern. I am visibly present and yet distinguished from those I observe. At the same time there are enough signs of physical discomfort to assert my actual presence and hint at the price I paid for “Being There.” By quoting Amharic phrases and providing their translation, the introduction assures

¹“In Jesus’ name!”

²“Jesus is Lord!”

³See Clifford Geertz. *Works and Lives. The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988, pp. 1–24.

the reader of my basic linguistic capabilities for understanding what is going on. At the same time, my self-identification as a somewhat distanced “Western observer” sets up an alliance with readers who would be unfamiliar with the scene, suggesting that I would read the situation not too differently. Finally, the conclusion to my observations, which in its generality can hardly be refuted, assures the imagined audience that a certain reflectiveness is aspired to and that all reflections are grounded in actually “Being There.”

Indeed, I was there. I actually did attend the Saturday healing service at the Ketena Hulet Full Gospel Believers’ Church in Addis Ababa on February 21, 2004 from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. I sat on those benches, took notes, observed, and thought. However, there are many different forms of representing this past event, all of which shape its content. My observation protocol of that service is a rather dry and phenomenological listing of worship positions, convulsions, sermon arguments, exorcism rites, and testimonies. It also meticulously records the beginning and end times of each service part as well as the number of participants, their clothes, and certain features of the building, perhaps aspiring to some standardization for comparing similar events. My diary entry about the event, on the other hand, is rather short and reflects the worship noise and intensity with some irony, notes my achievements and difficulties in understanding the Amharic language, and mentions a little encounter with children afterwards that was omitted in the observation protocol but corresponds well with my diary’s interest to reflect the omnipresent poverty. From these two accounts and my vague memories, I have produced a third narrative, my “Being There” account above, authorizing my presence and observations. This account, however, was shaped by a fourth interest, that is, to conform to Clifford Geertz ironic representation of such narratives in order to make a point about the many forms of representing history.⁴

This multifariousness of historic representation is the main topic of my dissertation about Ethiopian Pentecostalism. When I first set out to explore Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Ethiopia, I quickly realized that they were a vibrant and growing part of Ethiopian Christianity and that there was much primary material available, but almost no comprehensive and academic treatise of its history or theology. Therefore, I began to collect interviews, documents and personal impressions from as many churches as possible during my fieldwork, in the rather ambitious hope of writing an overview which would not only detail the genesis and present characteristics of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Ethiopia, but also study how Pentecostal identities are constructed and sustained in the Ethiopian church landscape. However, when I began to scrutinize the history of Ethiopian Pentecostalism, I became intrigued and fascinated by the divergence of my sources, the often irreconcilable differences between two accounts of the same event, the different ways to set up a story, and the political thrust of my informants. This called for a detailed investigation that would move beyond traditional historiography and could account for the many narrative plots, historical arguments and political implications contained in my sources. In the course of writing such a history, I realized that I was in fact studying the production of Ethiopian Pentecostal and Charismatic identities—in their past and present historiographic representations. Thus,

⁴It should be added that the self-transparency and intentionality suggested in these remarks also have an “author” function which I will leave to others to analyze.

by equally considering the “factual” and the “fictional” sides of oral and written histories, it became possible to show how Ethiopian Pentecostalism came into “being” as a concept, over and over again.

Most material for this study was gathered in three field trips to Ethiopia, conducted in 2003 from September 8 to October 7, in 2004 from February 17 to April 3, and in 2005 from January 3 to April 1. The largest part of the research was carried out in Addis Ababa, but in 2005 I also spent about three weeks each in Awasa and Bahir Dar. Addis Ababa is by far the largest and most hybrid city of Ethiopia, and almost all denominations have their headquarters there. Awasa is important for the early history of Ethiopian Pentecostalism and is located in a largely Protestant area. Bahir Dar, on the other hand, lies in the Orthodox north and is important for understanding the proliferation of Pentecostalism in contexts classically dominated by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). During my fieldwork I visited sixty-six different gatherings in twenty-one different denominations, from Sunday services and healing programs to small groups and prayer meetings. In Addis Ababa, I was able to acquire copies of all seminary theses pertaining to the topic of my research, which were a valuable resource never before explored to this extent. During my fieldwork in Ethiopia I conducted 115 interviews. Twelve more interviews were arranged in other contexts, partly as telephone conversations with Ethiopian Pentecostal leaders residing abroad. Altogether there were 139 informants from sixty-four different organizational entities. The typical interview length was roughly one and a half hours, and almost all were recorded on tape and subsequently digitized. Roughly seventy of these interviews which were most relevant to the history of Ethiopian Pentecostalism were transcribed and indexed for this study, the others were only revisited on occasion. Passages quoted in the thesis were re-transcribed in a more detailed fashion, in order to indicate emphasis, tonality, and breaks in accordance with the transcription guidelines provided in the appendix. Since I had guaranteed anonymity to all my informants, I assigned unique numbers to the interviews by which they are cited.

In addition to the fieldwork in Ethiopia, I conducted a study tour to Finland and Sweden in the summer of 2004 during the course of which I gathered a large amount of material from the Finnish and Swedish Pentecostal missions working in Ethiopia. Another archive visit was paid to the archives of the World Council of Churches in Geneva in November 2007. Relevant excerpts of the Finnish material were translated by Anna-Mari Nikkilä, whom I would like to thank for her diligent and careful work. All other translations of Amharic, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and German material were provided by me, unless otherwise indicated. The transliteration of Amharic terms is based on the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*,⁵ with the exception of proper names, for which I adhered to the spelling used by the respective persons, and geographic names, which conform to the transliteration on maps by the Ethiopian Mapping Authority. Religious terms are employed in the sense that my informants or general Pentecostal discourse would indicate.

This project would not have been possible without the help and support of others. First and foremost, I would like to thank my interview partners, who not only gave me a significant amount of their time, but also granted me valuable insights

⁵See Siegbert Uhlig, ed. *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica. Volume 1*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003, xx-xxi.

into their lives and their faith. I would also like to thank Genet Kebede, Nega Namaga, Solomon Gebremichael and Salam, Daniel Gezahegne, Beyene Dogarso, and Roswitha Schultheiß for providing me with accommodations and logistical assistance. A special thanks also goes out to Paul Baliski and Seleshi Kebede, who facilitated the most important initial contacts for me, and to Bedru Hussein, Debela Birri, and Michael Schultheiß for helping me to attain access to the key seminary libraries in Addis Ababa. Furthermore, I have very much appreciated the assistance in obtaining archive materials that was offered by Magnus Wahlström at the Swedish Pentecostal Research Institute in Ekerö, Pauli Runolinna and Rauno Mikkonen at Fida in Helsinki, and Paul Johansson and Joy Niswander of the Elim Bible Institute in Lima, New York. Moreover, I would like to thank Carol Waite for her most careful and helpful proofreading of the thesis draft. Needless to say, all mistakes remain my own.

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