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Review

# Prophets and prophecy as a response to crises: Prophet Esa in traditional religion of Wolaitta (1920-1928)

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This article explores the socio-political and economic context of Prophets and prophecy in Wolaitta, with specific reference to the Prophet Esa and his prophecy, which emerged in the context of traditional religions of Wolaitta, from 1920 to 1928. The article examines how the prevalence of crisis related to socio-political and economic influence, and the factors that determine who has access to such influence, can impact on perceptions of 'spiritual insecurity' in African communities. Often such perceptions and insecurities are expressed in prophetic terms. The article argues that prophets and prophecy is a manifestation of such expressions of socio-political and economic insecurities, as it does not occur in a vacuum but can be located in a socio-political and economic context. In this regard, the conquest of Wolaitta by Menilek's force in 1894 and the subsequent domination of the northerners resulted in the prevalence of series of socio-political and economic crisis in the area. After conquest, the oppressive social system known as neftegna-gebbar system was institutionalized in the area, leading to existence of maladministration, social inequality and injustice and economic exploitation. The Orthodox Church was serving as instrument to maintain such oppressive system. The infectious disease of the 1920s worsened the situation. Internally their traditional religion failed to be responsive to such crises, and also the people have been exploited by their religious functionaries. It was in this socio-political and economic context that Prophet Esa emerged and most of his prophetic and reformist messages are direct responses to the crisis. The arguments raised in the article are based on the author's critical engagement with relevant primary and secondary sources. The former includes information obtained from the systematic interviewing of knowledgeable individuals, while the latter consists of books, articles and thesis. These sources are critically examined and carefully cross-checked for their reliability.

**Key words:** Prophets, prophecy, Esa, traditional religion, Wolaitta.

## INTRODUCTION

Among indigenous societies in many regions of the world, the phenomenon, "prophet movement" emerged

in a certain socio-political and economic context. East Africa, including Ethiopia, is not exceptional to such

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kind of phenomenon. Eastern Africa has a long history of prophetic movements and cults, some linked to indigenous or "traditional" deities and spirits, some to Christianity, and others to Islam. These movements were reported from the earliest periods of colonial administration and missionary endeavor. Some were recognized as being efforts to overcome drought, famine, and other natural disasters; others were considered to be anti-European, often as atavistic manifestations of "heathen superstition," and as destructive of the "order" brought about by colonial administrations and therefore to be put down by force. It has often been held that these movements were early examples of "resistance" to colonial overrule, but many were in existence long before the Europeans arrived. Although some have indeed been part of resistance movements, all have been more than mere responses to colonial rule and have been concerned also with divisions and conflicts within and between local societies and their various elite and commoner groups (Kustenbauder, 2008; Isichei, 1995).

This indicates that prophets and prophecy play a big role in the religious life of Africa. And, before the advent of Christianity, Prophets 'had appeared in the past particularly in circumstances of social stress' in African traditional religious settings. The crises that led to circumstances of social stress can better understood through analysis of the socio-political and economic context of a certain society. This is because the socio-political and economic influence, and the factors that determine who has access to such influence, can impact on perceptions of 'spiritual insecurity' in African communities. Often such perceptions and insecurities are expressed in prophetic terms. However, the socio-political and economic contexts that influence prophetic messages differ from region to region and also differ in historical time and space. Thus, any attempt to make historical sense of prophet movements and their effects on communities in Ethiopia has to be approached from a perspective that takes the socio-political and economic context of Ethiopian society, in different historical time and space, into account.

In this regard, the people of Southern Ethiopia, including Wolaitta, have faced a series of socio-economic and political crises. Historically, the most significant event was the conquest by the Ethiopian Empire in the 1894, equated by the Wolaitta to the Amhara or *Neftegna*. This event is equated by some scholars as colonization. As a result of the conquest, the people of southern Ethiopia, including Wolaitta, were forcefully 'incorporated' into the quasi-feudal political-economic structure of Abyssinia. In the Wolaitta story, the conquest was described as the root of all evil. The result of invasion and conquest was: subjection to the *gabbar* system and linked with this economic exploitation and oppression; the abduction (e.g. when new Amharic governors were appointed) of innumerable people as slaves, servants or carriers, only a few of

whom were able to return; famine, disease and a growing sense of hopelessness and resignation, engendered by a total absence of justice. These things not only caused the number of the local population to shrink but shook their whole culture to its roots (Donham, 1986).

Notwithstanding this empirical situation, the academic attention accorded to this aspect of Ethiopian history is staggering. This is particularly the case regarding the emergence of prophetic movements in traditional religion as a response to crisis. However, this is not to deny that voluminous amount of literature has been produced on specific religious institutions, mostly by the institutions themselves, some by the state and some by social scientists. But what is missing in the previous work is an adequate relational analysis of the impact of crisis in the making of prophetic movement. Review of the literature of the past 25 years on the relationship between Christianity and African religious traditions by Meyer (2004: 455) clearly illustrates the gap on the issue.

Moreover, bibliography can illustrate the gap. Particularly Abink (2016) offers important installment of a scholarly bibliography in social science and history on Ethiopia and Eritrea. This and other volumes (see Heery, 2004) contain the titles that were gathered in the course of other research work and writing over the past years. While many of scholarly works that appear in the index of religious studies are concerned with Christianity and Islam, even those works that are dealing with traditional religion remain silent on the role of religious leaders in time of social stress. Moreover, almost all of research works that deal with traditional religion are carried out by anthropologists and other social scientist than historians. Thus, they do not show the changes and continuities in traditional religion of a certain society through time and space. This gap is particularly glaring as far as the emergence of prophetic movements in traditional religion in time of certain social stress is concerned. None of the scholarly works in the bibliographic lists appear with the title related to prophetic movements either in Wolaitta or Ethiopia at large. This indicates that scholarly works give little attention regarding the emergence of prophetic movements in the context of traditional religion of Ethiopia in general and Wolaitta in particular. Of course there are literature dealing with traditional and other universalistic religion in Wolaitta. A few of these studies mention prophet Esa and his reformist ideas in passing, and do not provide the detail information; Hitherto, there have been misrepresentations in the discussions with regard to Esa's teaching (Balisky, 1997). Moreover, almost all of them were monographs and remain inaccessible for scholars.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and evaluate how far and to what extent the prevalence of certain crises and the resultant social stress shape the prophets and prophecy within the context of traditional

religion. It did so by exploring the socio-political and economic context of prophets and prophecy in Wolaitta, with specific reference to the Prophet Esa and his prophecy. A brief survey of the context of my scope of study will therefore suffice for understanding the impact of crisis in the making of prophetic movement. The methodology employed includes the close examination of people's oral tradition through the systematic interviewing of resourceful informants to supplement the available literature. Their testimonies were carefully cross-checked and systematically analyzed through qualitative research methods.

## RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF THE PEOPLE OF WOLAITTA

It is essential to know, first of all, the religious background of Wolaitta because practically all the crises that the people of Wolaitta encounter, as every traditional society, and solution to the crises have been ingrained in the people elements of traditional religion. They interpret it in terms of their religious world view. And, just like other African traditional society, Wolaitta people are followers of traditional religion before the advent of Christianity and other universalistic religions.

As far as Wolaitta religious worldview is concerned, the belief in spirits and other natural objects dominates their daily life. Balisky (1997:32) said that in the Wolaitta worldview the spirits are real in everyday experience as natural objects are. This Wolaitta sacred worldview articulates a physical and spiritualized universe and does not distinguish one from the other. Also, the "spiritual beings" can change into "physical beings" in order to interact with the human being.

The Wolaitta believe that *alame* (world) did not come into existence of its own volition but was created or brought into by somebody known as *medhaga* (Eternal creator). For Wolaitta people the concept of Supreme Being whom they call *Saluwa Tossa* or sky God occupies an important place in their everyday life. This is revealed in their daily conversation proverbs like *Tossi Gikko* (if *Tossa* so willed), *Tossi Eres* (*Tossa* knows everything) etc. Whenever a group of people or an individual plan to do something and agree on the details, the saying *Tossa sheno Gido* (if *Tossa* so wished) or *Tossi maddiko* (if *Tossa* helped) follows. These sayings appear seemingly in daily conversations. Informants claim that He is equivalent to the God of Christians and Allah of Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this name is used now by almost all religions in Wolaitta. The Christians especially adopted the old name, *Tossa*, and used it in the *Wolaitigna* (Wolaitta language) version of Jesus Christ or as an equivalent to Jesus Christ. Thus, it is logical to accept the general assumption that *Tossa* must be old in this society, i.e. the name and the worship of this God is age-old.

However, in the Wolaitta religious view, apart from the belief in the existence of *Tossa*, there is the belief that

there are of *ayana* (lesser divinities or deities), who are believed to be intermediaries between God and man. *Ayana* are easily approachable.

Nevertheless, such kind of contradiction also exists in traditional religion of other African countries (Lambek, 2000; Kapferer, 1997). The African, and for that matter the Wolaitta of Ethiopia, have *ayana* of different realms of influence and fall into groups. The *ayana* (deities) are the representatives of God on earth. The *ayana* are there to receive offerings and sacrifices on behalf of God. *Ayana* in Wolaitta concept carry out petitions to God and at the same time interpret God as well as the ancestors to the people. The Wolaitta view their *ayana* as means to an end. Their popularity waxes or wanes if they are responsive or unresponsive to human demands.

Moreover, just like in other African countries, it is notable that before the advent of Christianity in Wolaitta, there were personalities who functioned under superhuman and supernatural influences as seers, diviners, medicine-men in African traditional religious settings. And Prophets 'had appeared in the past particularly in circumstances of social stress' in African traditional religious settings. Onunwa (1990) observed that, prophets occupy important position in African traditional religion just as priests. Prophets had appeared in the past particularly in circumstances of social stress. Since the history of the traditional religion has not been written, it has not been possible to record the development and rules of the prophetic ministry in the faith. A reconstruction of the ministry of prophecy in the traditional religion may not necessarily fit into the biblical or Islamic concepts and understanding of prophecy (P. 58).

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PEOPLE OF WOLAITTA

### Overview of socio-political and economic context of Wolaitta before Conquest

To clearly understand the events that led to crisis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent emergence of Esa's prophecy, providing historical background of Wolaitta is important. Wolaitta is a socio-political entity situated on the Southern part of Ethiopia, sharing borders with Gamo Gofa to the west, Hadiya and Arsi to the east, Sidama to the south and Kambata to the North. The history of Wolaitta, with its own unique civilization, is very old.

The people of Wolaitta developed a state structure between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries through a complex process that included among other immigration and integration. Until the advent of Wolaitamallas, who are said to have established organized administration, the pre-historic inhabitants of Wolaitta were alleged to be ethnically of Badia, Badigadala and Arujjia origin. In the course of time their ranks got swollen with the arrival of



migrants from different parts of the Horn of Africa. Some hold that there were three dynasties. However, the commonly held view is that the Wolaitta state had two dynasties; the first dynasty flourished under the name of Wolaitta-Malla which ruled until 15<sup>th</sup> century. The second dynasty that ousted the former emerged around 1500 under the name of Tigre. Tigre dynasty remained in power until the destruction of Wolaitta as kingdom by Abssynian force under the leadership of Menilek in 1894. Until the conquest in 1894, the kingdom had highly developed system of government with a constitutional monarchy at its head having the Balimola or the National Council. The Balimola had two houses. The first house had Eight Members which was known as the Hospun Balimola (Eight Balimola) with four years term in office, whereas the second house had 54 members which was known as Ishatamane Oydu Balimola (54 Barimola) with two years term in office. Alaro (1993) argues that "the system had executive, legislative and judiciary apparatus in which all offices were held through election." Thus, the political structure of Wolaitta shows that the kingdom was very organized. Captain Stigand (1969), who visited Wolaitta in the first decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century, illuminates the advancement of the people as, "The Wollamu [Wolaitta] appear to have reached a very advanced state of civilization for an African tribe, until just lately, entirely cut off from the outer world." The extent that the Wolaitta, with traditional weapon, defended Abyssinian army under Menilek, which was armed with modern weapon (sponsored by Europeans) for years also indicate how much Wolaitta state had sophisticated and organized political entity.

Wolaitta had also well organized and self-sufficient economy; agriculture is the main-stay of economy followed by trade and craft technology. By using plough technology, the people of Wolaitta produced variety of crops which is more than enough to feed the whole people of the state. With regard to trade three items of currency were put into use in Wolaitta- the *shaluwa*, the *Karetta* and the *Marchuwa*; *Shaluwa* was a kind of thread spun by women. *Karetta* was "a thread like material but dyed in different colours" and the *Marchuwa* was a thin iron bar and "was used for no other purpose but buying and selling". Stigand (1969) notes that, They possess money and hold markets (great steps in civilization and commerce)." Scholarly and travel accounts doubtlessly mention that Wolaitta was reputed for being a land of plenty, with rich fertile lands and evergreen mountains with a number of natural and cultural heritages. Indeed critical scrutiny of the motives and results of Menilek's conquest of Wolaitta provide reasonable justifications for resourcefulness of the region. One of the widely accepted scholarly interpretations offered to explain Menilek's motives for the belligerence is the fertility of the land of Wolaitta. They explain that there was a famine during 1888-1892 in northern Ethiopia and the fertile land of

Wolaitta attracted Menelik as a source of food supply (Henze, 2000). Moreover, the confiscation and plundering carried out by Menilek and his army after conquering Wolaitta in 1894 is also clear manifestation of the prosperity of Wolaitta. Sources indicate that Menilek and his army carried away 36,000 heads of animals to Addis Abeba without counting those slaughtered during the occupation of Wolaitta and the other goods plundered; the conquerors took away anything which seemed valuable. French journalist, Gaston Vanderheyem, who escorted Menilek in 1894 on his expedition to Wolaitta was the first to give a vivid account of the various aspect of Wolaitta; and all of his account clearly indicates the prosperity of Wolaitta (Alaro, 1993).

Thus, before 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Kingdom of Wolaitta had a highly developed and organized socio-economic and political system. The 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, brought alien rule to Wolaitta, destroying the age old state and its political system. The conquest and its aftermath will be discussed briefly below.

### **The conquest of Wolaitta by Abssynians In 1894 and the ensuing deep crises**

As explained earlier, the Wolaitta Kingdom, with its well developed and organized structure, maintained its independent existence for centuries. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian Empire state under Menilek destroyed such a developed and organized kingdom and its structure. Before the drama of final campaign of conquest in 1894, the Wolaitta resistance and Menlikes's aggression continued for a number of years.

According to informants, Menelik sent five successive expeditions led by his war generals from 1887 to 1894 but failed to defeat the Wolaittans.<sup>ii</sup> However, other sources argue that the first assault against Wolaitta began in 1890 and the battle which decided the fate of Wolaitta was fought from December 1 - 16, 1894, which was one of the bloodiest massacres in Menelik's conquest. According to Zewde (2002), the war between ጋና and Menelik was "one of the bloodiest campaigns of the whole process of expansion". Prouty (1986) also expressed her dismay of conquest as, "... Menelik's Christianizing-colonizing objective was achieved but at a terrible cost."

Thus the last quarter of the 19th century was a period of dramatic political and historical importance for the peoples of the Horn as elsewhere in Africa, because of the international imperialism and Abssynian feudal colonialism. The Abssynian kingdom under Menelik was armed and directly or indirectly encouraged by European colonial powers in their own interests, and in its efforts of colonial partition, at the expense of southern populations, including Wolaitta.

The nature of conquest and making of the empire state is considered as act of "feudal military colonialism" (Cerulli, 1956; Alaro, 1993; Chiatti, 1984).

Indeed the most agonizing aspect of Wolaitta conquest is that they were massively massacred and mutilated by the Abyssinian army who combined traditional barbarous practices of castration and mutilation of their enemy and superior firepower. For this reason, the physical, moral, and psychological damage done by Menelik to his colonial subjects seem to have been worsed than that of other colonial powers in the Horn of Africa. One could simply compare human and material losses<sup>iii</sup>, to mention only a few, in the war against the Wolaitta in 1894 with other contemporary colonial wars and battles in the region. The state expropriated almost all the Wolaitta land which it distributed to soldiers, to the Church, officials and the nobility. In other words, the Wolaitta lost a considerable number of their population, their property (cattle), and following their defeat in 1894, their independence, dignity and land, their representative institutions were destroyed and their culture marginalized.

After the conquest of the kingdom of Wolaitta, the new military authorities partitioned the area into 44 military governors, the garrison center being at Soddo. They possessed the land, the labour, and the politics which were maintained by the two main machines of empire building, the armed settlers (*neftegnas*), who were Orthodox Christian group, and the Ethiopian Orthodox church. The local people were assigned to each of the land owners as *gebbars* (a system of servitude imposed by victors over the vanquished). Thus the most significant manifestation of *nefteggna* power in Wolaitta was the initial expropriation and continuous alienation of land. It gave rise to profound resentment among the people of Wolaitta. '*Minile nu bitta Amaraw emidi nuna qasi kafuwaw emis*', literally, 'Menilek gave the land to the Amhara, and other people to the birds', laments a Wolaitta saying, meaning that the loss of their land reduced other people to corpses to be eaten by birds. The hateful exactions imposed by officials and landlords have inspired numerous sayings which depict the Amhara, with remarkable unanimity, as grasping and devious. According to Wolaitta, '*Amarayne Wangirelloy dichibenna dorssa qoddes*', means 'the Amhara and the wolf count sheep they haven't raised'. Moreover, the people of Wolaitta have felt the weight not only of the power vested formally in the officials, but of the entire Orthodox Christian group (*neftegnas*) settled in their land- all of whom have considered themselves as representatives of the ruling power. Sayings that indicate the abuse of such power, the Wolaitta people felt, are easy to obtain; for instance, one of Wolaitta proverb says, '*Asa wora Amarappe daruwa mitta qanxxa Wolaittay morancha getettes*', 'a Wolaitta who has cut a tree is guiltier than an Amhara who had killed a man.'<sup>iv</sup>

In addition to *neftegnas*, Orthodox Christianity is deeply involved in the process of empire building (Aspen, 2001). It was as an ideological companion of this 'reunification' that Orthodox Christianity as known

today reached most parts of southern Ethiopia, including Wolaitta, in the late 19th century. It was one of what Donham (1986) identifies as the three principal components of Abyssinianisation of southern Ethiopia:<sup>v</sup> "The expansion of Orthodox Christianity was the last aspect of the tripartite process of Abyssinianisation, and like the ability to speak Amharic; it was contradictory in class character: that is, it at once legitimized Abyssinian society and its traditional inequalities and undermined the superexploitation that took place in the peripheries" (Donham, 1986: 11).

For most people in southern Ethiopia, the Orthodox Church's close association with and ideological support of the feudal empire that committed one of the worst human atrocities is not easy to forget, especially when nothing is done on the side of the Church to redress this basic issue of morality. Since religion cannot be separated from concrete history, both material and spiritual, of real, historic people (Swi Werblowsky, 2004), it is not unexpected that the early 20<sup>th</sup> century prophetic movements in the traditional religious landscape of Wolaitta and southern part of Ethiopia at large bears the mark of this historical processes. The historical origins of Esa's prophetic movements in the context of traditional religious which influenced the orthodox Christian group, including their ideal of religiosity and their structural position vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis the state is result of crises.

A discussion of the socio-political and economic consequences of the Abyssinian colonial system is beyond the scope of this article; but I hope that this brief article clearly demonstrates the socio-political and economic context of Wolaitta after the Abyssinian conquest that influenced prophet Esa and his prophesy. Indeed, the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as present political conflict, contradiction, and crises can be traced to this period, the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **Continuation of crisis: Prophet Esa and his messages, 1920-1928**

According to Balisky (1997), there are two forces that contribute to the rise of prophets. Externally, the prevalence of certain crises within the given society shapes the prophet's message. Secondly, "there is an inner spiritual force that impels the prophet which could be called 'divine inspiration'." He concludes that, in the case of Esa, it was the external factor that shaped his teaching, the social and political factors which were shaping southern Ethiopian culture since 1890s.

Other scholars (Goil, 2001; Leclerc, 2006) argue that prophetic movements can be interpreted as solutions to two kinds of issues faced by native societies: one, external, referring to the disorganizing and de-structuring effects of contacts with nonnative societies. Acceptance of prophetic messages offers moral reform, which enables native peoples to control crises and

regain their integrity vis-à-vis intruders. The other problem is internal, having to do with dilemmas inherent to cosmologies and inherited from primordial times; for example, the challenges of harnessing dangerous shamanic power for the purposes of social reproduction. Clearly, explanations may draw equally on both hypotheses as far as a prophetic movement of Esa is concerned. Externally, Esa's prophesy and reformist ideas were evolved as a response to disruption and destruction of social structure by Absynians (nonnative) after conquest; the natives were socially and economically harassed by the Northerners. Internally, the dilemmas inherent to the traditional religious institutions and functionaries that seems unresponsive and exploitative.

Firstly, as explained earlier, a series of crises that the people of Wolaitta faced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even at present, can be traced to the period of conquest in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The conquest of the Wolaitta by the northern imperial armies in 1894 led to their forced inclusion in a feudalist social structure, in the most brutal way where Wolaittans were massively massacred and mutilated by the Absynian army who combined traditional barbarous practices of castration and mutilation; causing, the physical, moral, and psychological damage. The agonies and atrocities, once started in time of conquest, had continued (even increasing in magnitude) in the periods after conquest due to the institutionalization of a social system where Orthodox Church, soldiers and settlers had the right to claim land and extensive labor-services from the vanquished. Most Wolaitta became virtual serfs as a result of what was known in Amharic as the *gabbar*-system (*neftegna-gebbar* system). In addition, many thousands were carried away as slaves to the north by traders and bandits, as well as by departing governors and administrators. The ensuing deep crisis in the socio-economic system meant that the traditional structure of kingdom was virtually destroyed since their power and prestige were broken by the new rulers. The frequent raids by the northern settlers for cattle and people led to the growing disruption of social relations in the area as a whole. The Wolaitta of today still speak about the traumas of conquest, slavery, economic exploitation, and lack of justice, which led to the erosion of so much of their culture. The Orthodox Church was served as instrument of maintaining such oppressive system; for the Wolaitta people, the Orthodox Church's close association with and ideological support of the feudal empire that committed one of the worst human atrocities is not easy to forget. On the other hand, the traditional religion of Wolaitta failed to be responsive to such situation though the Wolaitta people continued to worship numerous spirits and also practitioners. Malevolent spirits such as *talahiya*, were highly feared by the people of Wolaitta and sacrifices were offered so as to appease them and thereby to escape from the harm they bring to mankind. Particularly, the *talahiya* or

Satan which was assumed to be introduced to Wolaitta after Menelik's conquest of the area in 1894 was highly feared and needs immeasurable offerings. Finally, the infectious disease which affected the people and its cattle, in the 1920, is also worsened the situation.

It was during this time that prophet Esa emerged. Thus, it could well be that prophet Esa felt burdened for his compatriots. They were socially and economically harassed by the Northerners. And they were being exploited by their religious functionaries. Esa's burden was translated in to action. As a response to domination by non-native forces Esa promised the people that God would help them to liberate their land from the invading force. Esa's teaching has got political dimension as he taught the people about the expulsion of the Northern settlers from their motherland. This was a threat to the officials as it might invoke the indigenous people against the new comers.

In addition to this, the reforms that he brought into the traditional religion can be analyzed from two angles; as a reaction to the view of Orthodox Church, and as a solution to reduce the elements of traditional religion that burdened the local people. Thus, he adopted some aspect from Orthodox Christianity, and integrated it into the traditional religion so as to bring a significant reform on it. In so doing they reacted to the view of Orthodox clergy and responded to Amhara domination. Of course, the rise and rapid expansion of the teaching of Esa, which was within the context of the primal religion of the south, indicate that the people of Wolaitta found little attraction to Orthodox Christianity. As explained earlier, for most people in Southern Ethiopia, the Orthodox Church's close association with and ideological support of the feudal empire that committed one of the worst human atrocities is not easy to forget, especially when nothing is done on the side of the church to redress this basic issue of morality. In Wolaitta and southern Ethiopia at large considerations such as these provide a substantial part of the explanation for the success of Esa's prophetic and reformist messages, which could be characterized as 'Wolaitta's revolutionary' response to Absynians and Orthodox Church. He fought for ethnic equality<sup>vi</sup>, social justice, land reform, and freedom in most cases favoring the native people. Consequently, the people began to call him *Esa Laliya*.<sup>vii</sup> Whatever its failings maybe viewed from a current perspective, Esa Laliya has offered the peoples of Wolaitta an alternative route to meaning, identity and even resistance to power in one of the darkest times of their history. Consequently, his messages remained the most dominant and popular even after he was wiped out by *neftegna* officials and in Wolaitta area, his prophesy and reformist messages are widely remembered by the people at present.

Another reform ideas of Esa was directed towards ways of reducing some elements of traditional religion that burdened the local people; letting the people to abandon the worship of various spirits and to worship

only *Tossa*, God. He was also introduced new ritual practice, like teaching the people to seek mercy by offering honey in place of animal sacrifices. In this regard he enabled the people to ascertain the omnipresence of *Tossa* among the ordinary Wolaitta people, and enabled them to worship *Tossa* together in an open field called as *Dubusha*. In effect the family members went to *Dubusha* especially on one day of the week, Sunday. There, the fathers were to pray *Tossa*. In praying he would dip his fingers in honey and flick it towards the sky, symbolizing that his prayer were directed to God/ *Tossa*, not to Satan. On the other hand, mothers pray to *Marama* or to St. Mary. In addition to this, Esa insisted that people should fast on Friday. Some literatures as well as my informants tend to explain that Esa taught the principles which are more or less similar to the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament (Decalogue).<sup>viii</sup>

In fact, Esa's teaching was loved, and as his message spread, his following increased in Wolaitta and in other Omotic speaking areas. Consequently, the songs announcing the worship of *Tossa* and denouncing other spirits were created in the Wolaitta language. He "stirred up the consciousness of many people and left a lasting impression on their heart." One of the songs which the people still remember is the following.

*Mittawu goynoppa, shuchawu goynoppa*  
*sharechuwa kalloppa, Gamasheras yarshoppa*  
*Nena Medhdha Xossa xalla amana*  
*A xalalay nena fatana madana.*<sup>ix</sup>

The above songs' literary translated as follows:

Do not worship trees, do not worship stone  
 Do not follow the magician/diviner, do not make  
 sacrifices to *Gamashera*. But believe only in *Tossa* who  
 created you.  
 It is only He who could save you

In the final analysis, even though Esa tried to reform the existing traditional religion by adopting some aspects of the universalistic religion, he did not make radical changes within the traditional religion for the fear of identity crises. Indeed there is an incredible amount of innovation and syncretism in its practice today, even drawing on Christianity and Islam. But scholars also note that both Christianity and Islam have incorporated some aspects of traditional religion (see Aspen, 2001; Braukämper, 2002). Esa's teaching has got political dimension as he taught the people about the expulsion of the Northern settlers from their motherland; it was considered as a threat to the officials as it might invoke the indigenous people against the new comers. Because of this Esa was imprisoned by the provincial governor, Dejazmach Habte Giyorgis, and taken to Addis Ababa. He was died a little before the advent of the missionaries in 1928. Therefore, this indicates the substantial influence of Esa's teaching even in the

politics.

## CONCLUSION

The commitment religion and religious prophets engender, and its impact on people's lives, as shown in the proceeding analysis, reconfirm that religion and religious prophets constitute an extraordinarily meaningful act. However, this might mean a range of different things for different people. But what seems to be common is that religious ideologies do what ideologies generally do: they give meaning to the dynamics of existence but also form an orienting aspect of the way human beings move in their worlds (Kapferer, 1997). Many people employ them to make sense of difficult situations and experiences. In the Wolaittan case, it can be noted that before historical circumstances brought the aggressively competing forms of world religions, the prophets of indigenous religious order emerged in time of crises and circumstances of social stress and, redirect their society in the context of the indigenous religious practices. But at present, the existence of prophets in traditional religion remain unrecognized and even the practitioners of traditional religion are demonized by the new ideologies of universalistic religion.

Like most prophetic movements, Esa's prophetic messages had appeared in circumstances of social stress. The event that led to a series of crises, and circumstances of social stress in Wolaitta occurred in the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The conquest of the Wolaitta by the northern imperial armies in 1894 led to the misery of the people, ensuing deep and series crisis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Wolaitta of today still speak about the traumas of conquest, slavery, economic exploitation, and lack of justice, which led to the erosion of so much of their culture. The infectious disease which affected the people and its cattle, in the 1920, also worsened the situation. By 1920s the society of Wolaitta had become demoralized and hopeless. The Wolaitta lacked pride of their identity because much of their own societal structure was replaced by that of the Northerners (Orthodox Christian group), who were harassing the local people socially and economically. Orthodox Church was served as instrument of maintaining such oppressive system. On the other hand, their traditional religious system was no longer functioned; they were being exploited by their religious functionaries.

It was during this time that prophet Esa emerged as he felt burdened for his compatriots. Esa's burden was translated in to action. Esa's prophetic and reformist messages could be characterized as 'Wolaitta's revolutionary' response to reactionary Abyssinians and Orthodox Church and the northerners/*neftegnas*. He fought for ethnic equality, social justice, land reform, and freedom in most cases favoring the native people. Esa Laliya has offered the peoples of Wolaitta an

alternative route to meaning, identity and even resistance to power in one of the darkest times of their history. Consequently, his messages remained the most dominant and popular even after he was wiped out by *neftegna* officials and in Wolaitta area, his prophesy and reformist messages are widely remembered by the people at present. Internally Esa brought elements of reform to the traditional religion to make it responsive to the then situation and also to save the people who were being exploited by their religious functionaries.

Finally, Esa was quilted by the politicians. The reason why the prophetic messages of Esa are so admonished and suppressed is basically because they enabled Wolaitta people refuse to evacuate the cultural space desired by the nonnative ideologies. I then conclude that prophecy of Esa in the context of traditional religion here, as is the case in many other places in the world, is not just a private matter of spirituality, but also a political act mediating historically constituted contests for power and resistances involved therein. Since the written information about Esa was too scanty to write the comprehensive history, I would like to suggest that further research should be made before the last remaining oral witnesses vanish.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors has not declared any conflict of interests.

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<sup>i</sup> Informants: Ato Tadesse Tantu and Ato Abraham Tanga, interviewed on May 04, 2010, Wolayta Soddo, and Balisky, pp. 64, 74.

<sup>ii</sup> Informants: Ato Bekele Matafa, interviewed on May 02, 2010, Delbo (Wolayta); Ato Merikine Maja, Ato Anjulo Bassa and Ato Mazgana Manja, interviewed on May 04, 2010, Ottona(Wolayta).

<sup>iii</sup> It is estimated that those who killed or wounded in Wolaitta numbered 118,987 (Prouty, 1986; Alaro,1993).

<sup>iv</sup> Informants: Ato Tajura Bergene, Ato Alagaw Anja and Ato Churqo Bariso, interviewed on May 03, 2010, Zalashasha(Wolayta)

<sup>v</sup> The other two being the spread of the rist system of land tenure and the adoption of the Amharic language.

<sup>vi</sup> Esa preached certain moral values like universal brotherhood and love for mankind regardless of their social and economic status. In this regard he preached equality of human beings to win the local people against the privileged classes like northern governors and neftegnas. Indeed, this message had psychological implication too since it enabled the majority of Wolaitta people, who have been undermined and felt inferior position due to racist attitude of Amhara officials and settlers, to regain at least a feeling of equality.

<sup>vii</sup> the one who releases to freedom; Ato Wana Wagesho and Ato Hailemickael Kuke, interviewed on May 01, 2010, Wolayta Soddo

<sup>viii</sup> These were: Do not believe in other spirits except Tossa; Do not steal; Do not kill; Do not lie; Do not commit adultery; Love your enemies; Be friend with each other and live in peace; Do not argue with your neighbor; Do not create divisions among yourselves; Prefer humanity to the clan pride

<sup>ix</sup> Informant: Ato Bibiso Bico, interviewed on May 05, 2010, Humbo (Wolayta).

## Review

# A paradox: Post-modern, postcolonial Guelwaar

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Post-modern in its critique of language, contesting of binaries, and resistance to closure, Sembène's 1993 film *Guelwaar*, later made into the novel of the same name, calls for real political change, constituting a paradoxically post-modern work with postcolonial political intentions and goals. Despite the apparent contradiction of styles and worldviews, the coincidence of the post-modern and postcolonial implies, Sembène's film illustrates as critics across the globe have identified, that these opposing realities coexist, just as Jameson's (1986) Marxian analysis had identified the overlapping of economies and modes of representation. According to Cornis-Pope (2012), "what needs to be developed is a mediating consciousness that can compare, translate and interface cultures" (p. 144). In fact, paradox is a mode where the postcolonial and postmodern meet. Sembène's use of paradox throughout the film recalls works of the period of the European Renaissance since, like it, postcolonial Africa represents a struggle with conflicting value systems and ideologies. Blending the legacies of West African and European traditions, literature, and orature, Sembène's film features irony as a strategy for representing the complex contemporary reality of his society and so undermines the polarity which some critics identify between postmodern and postcolonial sensitivities and goals.

**Key words:** Sembène, post-modern, postcolonial, paradox.

## INTRODUCTION

Although postmodern and postcolonial criticism both aim to deconstruct oppressive ideologies, some critics see them as fundamentally opposed in their effects. In her discussion of the post-modern/postcolonial nexus, Loomba (2001) contends that "While many critics believe that post-modern ideas of multiplicity and fragmentation make the standpoint of marginalized historical subjects visible, others argue that post-modernism carries these ideas to the extreme so that we cannot understand historical dynamics at all" (p. 240). According to O'Hanlon and Washbrook (1992), post-modern theory "tends to inhibit rather than to promote an active politics" (p. 154). In addition, according to Loomba (2005), "there is a long-standing debate, outside of postcolonial criticism as such,

whether Marxism and deconstruction are philosophically compatible (p. 211). Loomba (2005) concluded that "We need to consider the utility of both Marxist as well as post-structuralist perspectives for thinking about postcolonialism and its aftermath" (Loomba, 2005, p. 210). Recognizing this apparent paradox in postcolonial methodology, she calls for postcolonial critics to innovate and create new paradigms that navigate the inherent contradictions (Loomba, 2005, p. 211). Noting a similar paradoxical hybridity, Mark Mathuray, in his analysis of Ben Okri's *The famished road* (2003), takes issue with critic Douglas McCabe who identifies the novel as postmodern because of its eschewing of final truth because according to Mathuray, the novel's

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transcendentalism contests this claim, and Mathuray (2015) adds that the novel's "privileging of African folkloric and mythic literary models" (p. 1101) and denouncing of neocolonialism situate it rather in the postcolonial camp (p. 1102). Mathuray (2015) even comments that, due to the postcolonial aspects, the novel might be viewed in the same way as Frederic Jameson sees Third World literature, as "national allegory" (Jameson, qtd. in Mathuray, 2015, p. 1102). Mathuray suggests that rather than seeing the novel as a meeting ground of the postcolonial and postmodern, one should consider that "Okri's text instead places these two discursive frameworks at loggerheads with each other" (Mathuray, 2015, p. 1102). Ultimately Mathuray (2015) concludes that, because of the novel's use of modernist techniques such as fragmentation, eclecticism, and anti-realist strategies (p. 1109), it is rather an example of "a distinct African modernism" (p.114) which contests "catastrophic postcoloniality" (p. 1114) which had failed to address the needs of true subalterns in the society. In effect, Mathuray (2015) describes a paradoxical, anachronistic condition which Jameson had addressed in the concept of "combined unevenness" (Mathuray, 2015, p. 1108) in postcolonial magic realism which "depends on a content which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features ...a mode of production still locked in conflict with traces of the older mode" (Jameson, "On Magic Realism," 1986, p. 311). Similarly, Sembène's (1993) *Guelwaar* exhibits characteristics of both capitalist and precapitalist societies, producing hybridity and paradox, a cultural phenomenon which Colie (1966) had seen as a characteristic of societies in transition.

### Deconstructive strategies

In fact, in their deconstructive strategies, postcolonial works align well with post-modern ideology. In some cases, the goal of a postcolonial author is to dismantle a controlling European ideology or history, and so "absences are particularly important [...] the gaps in the record, the blind spots of epistemology and ontology become the locus of the possibility of genuine change" (Tiffin, 1988, p. 177-8). Erosive postcolonial strategies Tiffin (1988) identifies include those where "Destructive binaries are impossible to sustain, character escapes categorization both within and between texts, life and death are not absolutes, and no text is ever finally written" (Tiffin, 1988, p. 178-9). This post-modern model, clearly also in effect in *Guelwaar* (1996), can be experienced as liberation and not merely a crisis in representation (Tiffin, 1988, p. 179).

### Hybridity

With postmodern critiquing of identity and language,

*Guelwaar* (1996) is yet centered around a political speech and a call to action. In fact in the words of Amadou Fofana (2005) in his analysis of the film version, "His [Guelwaar's] speech is meant to spur critical thinking among the diegetic audience, and by correlation and extension, among the spectators, or external viewers of the film as well" (Fofana, 2005, p. 14). By moralizing and presenting a coherent political message, Sembène's film seems to realize atypical aims in a post-modern work. In fact, Sembène's work is notably hybrid and paradoxical. N'Gom (2002) sees the value precisely in its ability to synthesize oral and written traditions and ideologies in its form (p. 408) and identifies Sembène's appeal to African cultures in his use of Wolof words in French narration and the evocation of the tradition of griot storytelling to the community (p. 415). In N'Gom's (2002) view, *Guelwaar* communicates an assertion about the reality of Senegal in the 1980's, its "recolonization" through indirect economic means and institutions. Thus, the final sequence of the film ironically casts the work as an allegory, an anachronistic "African legend of the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

### Postmodern hybridity

Through film, rather than theory, Sembène (1993) recognizes paradox as a *modus operandi* in the postcolonial era. Thus, *Guelwaar* (1996) presents a critique of monolithic identities and of the ideological nature of language. The film focuses on hybridity as its narrative is centered on a naturalized Frenchman's search for his deceased Christian African father whose body has been confused with that of an elder from the Muslim community. While announced as deceased in the opening scene, the character of Guelwaar continues to play a polarizing role in the community throughout the film, and, rather than bringing the two communities together in their common grief, the deaths of the two elders only accentuate their differences. The investigation into the disappearance of the father reveals communities dealing with mistaken identities, complex and sometimes phantom relationships, a proliferation of linguistic ambiguities, and a conflation of the economic, religious and political systems. The flux in cultural and economic realities and the questioning of linguistic signs of contemporary Senegal postmodern condition which, like the period of the European renaissance, is riddled with conflicting value systems.

### Postmodernism

Sembène's work contests simple realities, identities, national origins, genres and preconceived concepts.

Haynes (1999) cites the film for its potentially hypocritical nature: an African film against foreign aid

financed by European governments and corporations (p. 22). One could say that the film is, benevolently considered political, real and complex or, in the best sense, opportunistic. In fact, the film later became the source of Sembène's 1996 novel of the same name. According to Sembène in the author's note of 1994, this seemingly illicit coupling of film and novel is a "bigamie créatrice et fécondante" (Sembène, 1996, p. 10). A script evolving into a novel about a dead man's political speech, Guelwaar (1996) is at the crossroads of oral, written and cinematic culture.

### Postmodern politics

Haynes (1999) affirms that post-modern criticism need not necessarily remain detached from any concept of political action and material reality. In his view, in the contemporary situation, "it becomes necessary and useful, practically as well as theoretically, to recognize the extent to which the political landscape has taken on a Foucauldian, post-modernist form, in which political resistance is far from dead, but takes numerous dispersed forms, often at lower levels of political expression: in the 'popular,' the politics of everyday life, a "politique par le bas" (p. 22). Guelwaar realizes this succinctly in his call to Africans to resist foreign aid at the local level.

### Postmodern linguistics

The film shows the arbitrary nature of linguistic signifiers and how they carry social meaning and create and reflect divisions within societies. When it was determined that Guelwaar's body has been mistaken for Meyssa Ciss, a Muslim, and the prospect of opening a Muslim tomb arises, the local Muslim peasants say to the village chief, Baye Aly, "It's Meyssa Ciss in that grave, got it?" indicating that they will ruin the chief's reputation if he does not comply, knowing he misappropriates public funds. The identity of the man in the grave is temporarily determined by politics and convention, not physical reality. Further, when the Muslim community learns of the presence of Pierre Henri Thioune, Guelwaar, in their cemetery, one of the mourners, Meyssa's wife, complains that she will not continue mourning for an "atheist" knowing him to be the defunct Catholic. In this case, language announces views on religious diversity, and thus as much about the speaker as the characteristics of the individual in question. Sembène seems to comment on the impossibility of coordinating action between communities when the very words used to grasp it are inherently ideologically motivated and politically divisive. He deconstructs language by showing that it is ideologically biased, one of the "two main purposes in deconstructing a literary text" according to Tyson (2006,

p. 259).

### Postmodern paternity

Both the Catholic and Muslim communities are perplexed with changing, complex, or phantom identities. In the mourning Muslim community, Oumy, the second wife of the deceased Muslim, Meyssa Ciss, in whose tomb the body of the Catholic was erroneously laid, refuses to continue with the fourth month period of mourning required of a widow, thus rejecting any possibility of her bearing the dead man's fetus. Her resoluteness in denying that paternity is backed by the knowledge that the children she had already born were in fact her brother-in-law's and not the descendants of her 80-year-old impotent spouse, Meyssa Ciss, who had publicly acknowledged them. The confusion of her dead husband with the deceased Guelwaar thus eventually exposes a community where identities are fixed by societal relationships which do not reflect biological or supposed objective reality.

### Postmodern blurring

Similarly, in the post-modern, postcolonial context, where identities are complex and contradictory, distinctions between politics, religion, and economics appear fluid or arbitrary. Guelwaar's other son, Barthelemy, at the constable's office to report his father's body missing is greeted by the policeman Gora who locates a file on the "dissident." Gora recalls a meeting with Guelwaar where the policeman criticized talk of the misappropriation of public funds at Guelwaar's family's church meetings as politics rather than religion. Similarly, at the police station, a suspect is being interrogated by police for allegedly raping his sister, an instance of a violent violation or blurring of cultural and personal boundaries. The man's mother reflects that, with an absent husband and a rapist son, it would be preferable to be dead than to exist in such a society, a mirror or opposite image of Nogoy Marie's family situation. Eventually, when asked if he is Senegalese, Barthelemy waves his French passport at Gora, at which Gora explains that Bart is a therefore foreigner in his own country. When local chief, Baye Aly, asked why Gora always speaks French with Barthelemy, Gora explains that he is a "black white man" in that he does not speak the local language. These apparent paradoxical assertions signal the complex and subjective nature of what seem fixed aspects of identity and society.

### Postmodern resistance to closure

Ultimately, the film resists absolute closure as the eventual recovery and identification of the body does not resolve the issue Guelwaar had admonished against.



Relocating Guelwaar to an appropriate cemetery, the Catholic funeral procession encounters a truck loaded with food aid promised to the inhabitants of Ker Baye Aly in order to placate them after the disturbance. In memory of Guelwaar's denunciation of aid as a form of subjection, the boys in the mourning Christian community empty the sacks and run the funeral procession over their contents. The event evokes a questioning and belies Barthélémy's statement of closure that all has ended well. The boys' defiance represents a turning point and the accomplishment of Guelwaar's mission to denounce foreign aid, but is merely a segment in the ongoing struggle between the communities. Ironically, the denunciation of foreign aid could potentially unite the Catholic and Muslim communities. As Mowitt (1998) points out, the "mutual recognition of the effects of postcolonial dependency subtends and undermines the ethnic rivalry between Muslims and Christians" (p. 133). Yet the film ends still questioning this unifying outcome.

### The Carnavalesque

From the start, the film presents an array of images of paradox and ambiguity. It begins with Guelwaar's disabled son Aloys arriving to tell his mother of Guelwaar's death. While Guelwaar's widow, Nogoy Marie, reflects on the wedding ring her son has brought her, there is an interruption in the narrative, a flashback to Guelwaar's wedding, where the focus on the first wedding kiss and on the ring is juxtaposed with the image of a funeral wreath on a van destined for Guelwaar's body. Thus, the film opens with an invocation of carnivalesque coincidence of opposites.

### Carnavalesque paradox

The fluid and complex nature of society is reinforced through paradoxes throughout the work. With Guelwaar's body missing, the deceased is more central to dilemma of the living as they become more and more involved with his death and its aftermath. "Jamais de mémoire d'homme, mort ne fut plus vivant," Sembène (1996) informs in the novel (p. 38). The mourners were also haunted by the suspicion that a potential fetishist might have stolen the corpse for pre-Christian and pre-Moslem rituals revealing an even more complex religious syncretism and vestigial traditions perhaps deemed already buried in a distant pre-capitalist and pre-colonial past. Due to the co-presence of competing systems of value and interpretation, Sembène's postcolonial texts, like those of the Renaissance, can be seen to privilege paradox. As Rosalie Colie (1966) indicates: Quite clearly, paradoxes are phenomena by no means peculiar to the historical period called the Renaissance, but occur in any period or place where intellectual speculation goes on.

They tend to constellate; however, in a period, like the Renaissance, of intense intellectual activity, with many different ideas and systems in competition with one another. (p. 33)

Thus, Guelwaar's criticism of food aid appears to be the polar opposite of the Renaissance paradoxical encomium which praises something unpraisable (Colie, 1966, p. 5). Guelwaar criticizes what is apparently uncriticizable, a gift of food.

### Carnavalesque ambiguity

The scene at the cemetery participates in carnivalesque ambiguity not unlike that described by Bakhtin (1984) in his analysis of the fertile ambiguity in Rabelais's society. Both diagetically and metaphorically Guelwaar speaks from beyond his mortality. In perhaps a nod to magic realism, the Marxist Sembène has Guelwaar's widow, Nogoye Marie, insist that she repeatedly hears her former husband communicating to her both in the home and at the Muslim cemetery. Despite the severe division between the Christian and Muslim communities and their dogmas, the grave evokes a common human condition anchored in life's universal cycles. Furthermore, the men at the cemetery begin to reminisce about Guelwaar's past exploits, recounting how he had once disguised himself as an old woman in order to carry on an affair with one of the wives of the muezzin, thus associating the story with the genre of the farce and its logic of reversals. The humorous tale ends with a reminiscence of Guelwaar who is seen in a flashback running out of the tent, having abandoned his transgender garb and thus revealed naked as male in a full carnivalesque reversal where the love-making devolves into a desperate run to save his life from angry villagers who discovered his ploy. Sembène, in this graveside laughter, reveals a society as multifaceted as the renaissance world Bakhtin evokes in his analysis. According to Bakhtin (1984), Rabelais's laughter was complex, ambivalent and communal. "True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it" (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 122-123). Like Rabelais's text, *Guelwaar* (1996) evokes a contradictory whole and an ambivalence which also seem pertinent to the postcolonial and post-modern condition.

### Paradoxical postcolonialism

"Post-colonialism" itself paradoxically attests both to the period marking *the end* of overt colonial exploitation and also to its *continuation* through indirect means in society and culture, another of the epidemic of paradoxes the heritage of centuries of colonization left. Certainly, colonization, formulated in the context of "civilizing" missions and evangelization, was much other than what it

claimed to be. Similarly, Guelwaar calls attention to the contradictory aspect of foreign "aid" as both help and hindrance to the affected population. Paradoxes mark both social and epistemological conflict. "One element common to all these kinds of paradox is their exploitation of the fact of relative, or competing, value systems. The paradox is always somehow involved in dialectic: challenging some orthodoxy, the paradox is an oblique criticism of absolute judgment or absolute convention" (Colie, 1966, p. 10). Guelwaar's criticism of food aid points to the hypocritical belief in the value of food aid, which, although seen to enrich a population, is often used to placate it and make it dependent. His position is clearly moral. However, the preponderance of paradox throughout the text also points to the epistemological crisis of the postcolonial and postmodern condition.

### Foreign aid and foreign language

Foreign aid is double-edged in how it affects the giver and the taker much as is the nature of writing in postcolonial Africa where the former colonizers' language is used to criticize the former colonizer and where languages at the same time create global communities and divide local inhabitants through their spheres of influence. When the document from the hospital attesting to the fact that it is the body of Guelwaar that the Muslim community has buried in their cemetery is presented to Mor Ciss, the patriarch of the community affirms that he cannot read French, a cultural and linguistic residue of colonialization left behind. Similarly, the Catholic community, having arrived at the Muslim cemetery, cannot at first identify the tomb of their lost family member, being unable to read the Arabic inscriptions on the tombs.

Irony in the contemporary political and economic situation in Senegal is furthermore presented as Gora cites the cases of young French nationals who visit Senegal each year working at the harvest while a native son like Barthélémy, having become European, remains comfortable in France. Barthélémy asserts however that, often, apparent gifts are political and that, ultimately, foreign aid mostly benefits a corrupt few who take money out of the country for foreign investments of their own ending up in European banks. Similarly, Gor Mag notes the disturbing change in social, economic and political views he has seen where what were once vices, such as misappropriating public funds, now pass as virtues. He adds that those who took over after the French are not better than them and do not even speak the local languages. Gor Mag explains that the Christian community elders had asked Guelwaar to denounce foreign aid in a public speech in order to end the corrupt cycle. Significantly, in the scene which is a recollection of Guelwaar's speech denouncing foreign aid, there is a banner announcing North/South cooperation, uniting the

polar opposites in true carnivalesque style.

### Neocolonialism

These indications represent a society whose values are contested and in flux due to colonialism and neocolonialism. In fact, Mbembe (2001), tracing the history of the postcolonial situation, recalls that the colonial authority initially presented itself as a benefit to the African colonies, "as a *free gift*, proposing to relieve its object of poverty and free it from debased condition by raising it to the level of a human being" (p. 34-35). The colonial power was supposed to help the indigenous in the colony and provide a moral education which included teaching the value of work (Mbembe, 2001, p. 35). According to Guelwaar, European colonization did much of the opposite. In many instances, colonial and later neocolonial authorities coopted religious, ethnic, and family groups to make them clients and beneficiaries of the state. "The state was also able to control ethnic and regional tensions, either by creating jobs in the public services or through borrowing or direct intervention in the productive system" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 43), creating a process where "economic *things* were converted into social and political things" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 46). Similarly, in *Guelwaar* (1996), as described by both the eponymous hero and his son, political officials manipulate international aid using it to appease tensions and create a political alliance with the local community.

In *Guelwaar* (1993), the state, as represented by the deputy mayor, and the police commissioner, pacifies a religious community, represented by the Ciss family, with gifts of foreign food aid. Yet, it is the imam, ironically in a violent and offensive outburst, who stops a brawl resulting from the degeneration of the discussion into accusations. When the prefect arrives, representing secular authority, Amadou Fall, who had ordered Guelwaar's silencing, denounces the Catholics, citing that Islam has its roots in Senegal. The contention of religiously motivated action conceals the violent cover up of the appropriation of economic aid for political gain. In this instance, the political, religious, and economic spheres appear inseparable. Barthélémy counters with a reflection on the multinational aspect of religion in Senegal with Muslims making pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia and Christians to Jerusalem, calling into question the existence of a purely African religion and the appropriateness of religious considerations in the matter. Ultimately, the imam, Birame, opens the grave to ultimately settle the dispute revealing Guelwaar's body in the tomb and end the contentious debate. Ironically, Marxist Sembène leaves it to a religious leader to proceed to definitive action. Recognizing the futility of debating cultural claims, Birame removes the body in a way respectful of both communities and their claims to truth while effectively settling the initial case at hand.

*Guelwaar's* (1993) condemnation of the acceptance of foreign aid in Senegal occurs after the economic crises of the 1980's. According to Mbembe (2001), MEW economic and political systems in former African colonies allowed corrupt postcolonial regimes to maintain unjust systems of domination rather effectively through the 1970s (p. 43). However, deregulation in the 1980s disrupted the systems (Mbembe, 2001, p. 55). In short, to "neo-liberal all out deregulation policies are thus undermining the arrangements that had, in practice, enabled the postcolonial potentate, at least in some countries, to reach more or less dynamic compromises with the indigenous systems of coercion, and to finance the relations of subordination" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 56).

Like *Guelwaar*, Mbembe (2001) sees the solution in direct action: "With or without international creditors, Africa must face up with the challenge of the competitiveness of its economies on the world level. This challenge cannot be victoriously met in the current world economy without an increase in productivity" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 57). The manipulation and concealment of social realities in contemporary Africa, no matter how complex and changing, as described by both Sembène (1993) and Mbembe (2001), can only delay needed change.

Ultimately, Sembène's (1993) film points to paradoxes in the postcolonial African situation and in human society. The film shows that religion can provide a veil for political or economic actions. Identities are varied and complex, yet identifying commonalities could unite groups. Although, language is an imperfect grasp on reality and inevitably ideological, fiery words, like those of *Guelwaar* or *Birame*, can produce change and incite or subdue violence, and a Marxist film maker can see a religious leader as an effective agent of change. Sembène's film, much like the texts of the European Renaissance, represents a world profoundly ambivalent, where the roles of politics, religion and economics are closely intertwined. Sembène's post-modern filmic text posits a real world response to neocolonialism. The investigation of *Guelwaar's* death is "both autopsy.... and cure" (Eisler, 2006, p. 85) for the postcolonial legacy. The work exposes how language, identities, societal structures, and cultural beliefs are fallible and biased, yet postmodern film can contest social realities and create the possibility for new relationships. As critics have shown across the globe, the contemporary situation, especially in postcolonial Africa, is paradoxical; syncretism and hybridity are topical, and dogmatism of any kind can be an obstacle to thought and action. Paradox is an ancient trope still relevant as a to vehicle of thought today, as it allows for the interfacing of conflicting conflicting systems of representation, societies and values. Sembène seems to have discovered the utility of paradox as a postmodern, postcolonial trope.

## Conflict of interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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