

# The Charismatic Movement in Ethiopia

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# THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT IN ETHIOPIA

## HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND FOR AN IDENTITY PROBLEMATIC<sup>1</sup>.

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### SUMMARY

More than an external “intrusion” we believe that the current success of Pentecostalism and Charismatic movement in Ethiopia, especially in the South-West, is the result of an internal dynamic produced by the quest of a new identity. For those Ethiopian nationalities who do not have a long common history with the northern highland Amhara culture, Pentecostalism is a Christian alternative with no liabilities and that allows a cultural emancipation. This conversion-phenomenon was already observed in southern territories about Evangelicalism. Pentecostalism/Charismatic is a similar answer (cultural freedom) to similar situations (domination by the Amhara culture). But the ‘Pentecostal like’ liturgy (or Charismatic) might be even more adequate because of the context of therapy and the glossolalia showing the Holy Spirit’s presence. The clues for understanding the Charismatic phenomenon in Ethiopia are economical, sociological, anthropological, political... and probably historical too. But they are surely internal to the Ethiopian society.

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<sup>1</sup> Complete study is published in French: DEWEL Serge, 2014, *Mouvement charismatique &*

## INTRODUCTION

Although important, the expansion of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia is not only little but not well known. Even though it was probably introduced from the outside, its success which has cut off from missionary contact over the decades tends to show that it is a suitable message to Ethiopia. The spread and development of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia is mainly the fact of internal social agents. Our statement is that the widespread of Pentecostalism finds its roots in the Ethiopian society itself which enables its expansion and in the foreground an identity response.

The most detailed and the most recent studies were mainly interested in explaining the history of national churches (monographs), the causes of the rise of evangelicalism in Ethiopia or the history and historiography of the charismatic movement. Researches did not go beyond 1991, when the freedom of worship was established and which is also the beginning of the significant rise of the evangelical movement in Ethiopia. We therefore do not have contemporary vision of the phenomenon beside the official data extracted from the 1994 and the 2007 mega censuses. The current situation seems even more confused since all Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations are all gathered under one common label: *ፕሮቴስታንት*<sup>2</sup> (or *Protestants* in national datas).

## CONTEXT

The rise of the Pentecostal faith and the charismatic movements is a worldwide phenomenon that does not affect only Ethiopia but also the entire African continent and the rest of the world too.

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<sup>2</sup> *ፕሮቴስታንት* [ፕሮቴስታንት] is the Ethiopian word in use since the 1970s that designates the Christians, who are not Orthodox, neither Catholics; in other words those who are somehow Evangelicals. Official censuses refer to "Protestants".

Nevertheless, as the social dynamic is not everywhere similar, it is worth seeking for a better understanding of the causes for the Pentecostal's contemporary growth in the particular case of Ethiopia.

Ethiopia has a long Christian History with roots deeply connecting into the biblical substratum as the country was evangelized quite early (4<sup>th</sup> century). Due to the Jesuit's tentative to convert Ethiopia to the Catholic Church in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the country has also developed an old and quite traditional suspicion against all 'foreign kind' faith. That suspicion has risen to such a stage that it imprinted the national identity, shaping it in the mould of the *Tāwahādo* (EOTC)<sup>3</sup> faith which used to be Ethiopia's historical and official national Church until 1974<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the Ethiopian identity is more or less conditioned by the image of a *Christian glaci*s surrounded by external enemies which are set in the lowlands<sup>5</sup> like an island amid an ocean. This image has been strengthened by the Catholic attempt in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and even after during the savage Ethiopian struggle against the *Scramble for Africa*<sup>6</sup> and the new European Imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Status and position of the missions -both catholic and evangelist- always depended on that subliminal image.

This context was not supposed to ease the rise of Evangelicalism, and later Pentecostal churches in Ethiopia, especially in the highlands that are traditionally following the Ethiopian orthodox faith. Researchers and major contributors who have studied the historical background of Evangelicalism in Ethiopia considered it both as a foreign importation and as an indigenous trend that was ready to blossom when the evangelical missionaries arrived in southern Ethiopia<sup>7</sup>. Scholars are also pointing the foundation of the first national Pentecostal

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<sup>3</sup> EOTC is the official acronym of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* Church. The Ethiopian Church is not properly orthodox (as it is a non-Chalcedonian Church) and therefore we refer to it as "orthodox" (with quotation marks).

<sup>4</sup> Eyayu Lulseged 1990.

<sup>5</sup> This image is pretty well depicted in a masterwork about the geographical shaping of the Ethiopian identity: GASCON 2006.

<sup>6</sup> About the historical context of the *Scramble for Africa* see CHAMBERLAIN 1974.

<sup>7</sup> BOLL, KAPLAN, MARTINEZ d'ALOS-MONER 2005, CRUMMEY 2000, SAEVERAS 1974. Mostly attached to the mainstream current of Protestantism: AREN 1978, EIDE 2000, Fekadu Gurmessa 2009, LAUNHARDT 2005. Evangelicalism in the south: BALISKY 2009, FARGHER 1996. The Anabaptist church of Ethiopia: HEGE 1998.

churches<sup>8</sup>, its fast growth at the end of the 1960's, and the persecutions that rapidly followed during the late imperial period and the so-called *Därg* time<sup>9</sup>. Eventually, we can find studies dealing with the very first post-revolutionary years. But no research on the current situation has been held at a national stage up to now.

It is very common to say that the new faiths were imported by missionaries, sometimes with a hidden political agenda. Are those “new churches” really conquering Ethiopia? Or could the success of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia be the result of a national internal social dynamic that tends to redefine the social and cultural identity? We believe in this second option and we intend to prove it by simply reconsidering the figures of the national statistics.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

We've already mentioned that Ethiopia is considered as traditionally Christian (at least for its oldest territories: the northern highlands) following the “orthodox” Monophysite faith, locally called *Tāwahādo*. The second main characteristic of the commonly widespread “Ethiopian identity” label is the Amharic language (or at least the Semitic languages: *ge'ez*, *tigriña* and *amariña*). Both Semitic language and religion used to be the “official” and usual reference for the Ethiopian nation. They were raised at that status by the successive imperial rulers since the conversion of Ezana (4<sup>th</sup> century AD) and furthermore by the Amhara rulers since 1270<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, while (re)conquering the southern territories during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Mənilək's *aqānna*<sup>11</sup>, Ethiopians were spreading Amharic

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<sup>8</sup> For example HAUSTEIN 2011, p.14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Revolutionary and Marxist military period (including *Därg*, PMAC and Ethiopia's People Republic) led by Mängəstu Haylä-Maryam (1974-1991).

<sup>10</sup> Tadesse Tamrat 1972, DERAT 2003.

<sup>11</sup> *Aqānna* is the name given to the (re)conquest of the southern territories mainly conducted by Mənilək (GASCON 2006).

language and orthodox religion in Muslim and pagan regions, east south and south-west from the Christian highlands. In the newly (re)conquered territories any commitment with the state was necessarily done in Amharic and the only acceptable faith was the *Tāwahādo*. This last point has been especially enforced by *aṣe* Yohännəs IV (reign 1872-1889); his successor Mənilək II had rapidly softened that ideological position.

It early appeared obvious to emperor Haylä-Səllase that he would need the presence of the protestant-evangelicals for the modernization of Ethiopia and he therefore slightly half-opened the door for them. After the withdraw of the Italian fascist occupation troops in 1941 and the restoration of the imperial power in Ethiopia, the missions that were evicted by the fascists were welcomed back by the emperor and soon it became crucial to clarify the situation. In this aim the Decree of the Mission was promulgated in 1944. This was officially establishing the presence of foreign missions in Ethiopia for the first time and giving them a legal frame. It is important to mention at this stage that the decree was only concerning foreigners<sup>12</sup> and no Ethiopian evangelical community was recognized yet.

Several conditions clearly explained and detailed by Dr Tibebe Eshete, had been easing the penetration of the evangelical faith in south Ethiopia: the strong link binding the state and the EOTC<sup>13</sup>, the Italian propaganda against the EOTC<sup>14</sup>, the Amharic edition of the Bible<sup>15</sup>, the use of the ge'ez language in the orthodox liturgy<sup>16</sup>, a strong wish of reform inside the EOTC<sup>17</sup>...

A field study that was undertaken in Käfa has shown how Evangelicalism was the main way to escape from discrimination and obtain a social deliverance from the traditional 'masters'. The

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<sup>12</sup> Tibebe Eshete 2009, p.94.

<sup>13</sup> Tibebe Eshete 2009, p.35.

<sup>14</sup> Tibebe Eshete 2009, p.38.

<sup>15</sup> Tibebe Eshete 2009, p.52-53.

<sup>16</sup> Tibebe Eshete 2009, p.54.

<sup>17</sup> Tibebe Eshete 2009, p.59.

conversion of the Mang'o to the Protestantism is a crystal clear example of this strategy<sup>18</sup>.

The history of the Pentecostal movement in Ethiopia is far more recent with a first long term mission starting in 1951 and conducted by the Mattssons, a Finnish couple. They were followed by Swedish missionaries from 1959 onward. As early as 1967 the Full Gospel Believers' Church of Ethiopia (FGBC) was established (but not officially recognized yet) as the expression of a national Pentecostal movement (not connected to missions<sup>19</sup>) showing how fast the Pentecostal movement became widespread. The historiography of the Pentecostal movement in Ethiopia has been deeply studied in a recently published book that can't be overlooked<sup>20</sup>.

One of the facts that attracted our interest is that as early as the late 1960's, Pentecostals were persecuted and discriminated in Ethiopia, not only by the imperial police, orthodox members and clergy but also by other Evangelicals who were trying to keep away from them and avoid any form of assimilation. On the other hand in Ethiopia all Evangelicals and Pentecostals are indiscriminately called **ጳጳጳ** *Pente*<sup>21</sup>; a word used for all Christians that are neither Orthodox nor Catholics. This shows how the situation can be confusing when the researcher tries to go deeper inside the categories.

Referring to Dr Jörg Hausteine, the *most reliable religious data for Ethiopia is provided by the decennial Population and Housing Censuses*<sup>22</sup> (1984, 1994 and 2007) and indeed they are. Nevertheless, the *Census* is not providing any other information than the total number of the *Protestant* population (number: 13,746,787; part of

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<sup>18</sup> YOSHIDA 2010.

<sup>19</sup> The FGBC is the expression of a national Pentecostal revival among which the Kenyan pastor Chacha Omaha was a charismatic leader; other Pentecostal churches were founded in the following of the Finnish and Swedish missions (Həywwät Bərhan Church and Gännät Church).

<sup>20</sup> HAUSTEIN 2011, p.14.

<sup>21</sup> For the spelling of the word *p'ent'e* in Amharic one would consider the etymological origin (**ጳጳጳ** *P'änt'äqost'e*, see KANE 1990, vol.II, p.2248.) and therefore prefer **ጳጳጳ**; while others would refer to the contemporary pronunciation **ጳጳጳ**.

<sup>22</sup> HAUSTEIN 2011, p.18.

total population: 18.6%)<sup>23</sup>. Among the *Protestants* no subcategory has been considered, which shows no interest of detailing what might be the different kinds of “foreign faiths”. One question is why is there a lack of interest? In the same time, it is not so easy to know which *Protestant* current is really raising: mainstream Lutherans or other Evangelicals, or Pentecostals.

On the other hand, it is well known that the charismatic movement is hitting all the Christianity in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* Church is not spared as the new *ortho-p’ent’e* movement attests.

## ENDOGENIC APPROACH

When referring to the introduction and the fast growing of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Ethiopia, most commentators are seeing an obvious external print. Is this not the confrontation of two Ethiopian myths? The first dealing with the united national identity as always dreamed by the ንጉሠ-ነገሥት (*Nəgusä Nəgäst*) based on the model of the *Tāwahādo*-amhara couple, and the second which is the myth of the intrusion, the መጠቀሚያ (mät’é haymanot), an imported faith, threatening the national identity. Tibebe Eshete synthesized the published material, compiled the fruit of many interviews and analysed the reasons of success of the Evangelical movement in Ethiopia<sup>24</sup>. While stating the indigenous roots of Evangelicalism in Ethiopia, he has shown it was a genuine response to sociocultural pressures.

Anthropological and sociological researches led in several African countries tend to demonstrate how the adherence of so many Africans to charismatic movements or Pentecostal faith seems natural

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<sup>23</sup> HAUSTEIN 2011, p.18 and footnote 81 for the 2007 *Population and Housing Census*.

<sup>24</sup> Tibebe Eshete 2009.



and does not need any external influence<sup>25</sup> beyond the preliminary missionary action. Oral theology, a large part dedicated to the expression of the individual experience and the therapeutic wrapping are certainly counting a lot. This is certainly what Harvey Cox, with a provocative excess probably, was meaning: *Indigenous African churches are totally Pentecostal*<sup>26</sup>. Some features of the Pentecostalism are also those that might have seduced some Ethiopians as reflecting indigenous cultural practices: an open space for the expression of individual experiences, an oral theology and a direct contact between the worshipper and God with no hierarchy to interfere. Considering the fact that a large part of the population has no direct access to medical or sanitary structures, the healing doctrine that brings a new therapeutic hope with the help of the Holy-Spirit is not the less/considerable. And last but not least, the prosperity gospel, the possibility of becoming rich here and now, without culpability and without needing to wait for the paradise, must also have attracted some of the followers

Basing my approach on those remarks I'd suggest adopting an endogenic point of view to study the rise of the Pentecostal faith in Ethiopia; reasons are to be found inside the Ethiopian societies. We have now an enlightening on where (South and West Ethiopia), how (by locals) and why the Evangelical movement raised up in Ethiopia.

But in any case this is not enough to explain why, between the 1994 and 2007 censuses, the "Protestant" part of Ethiopians grew up from 10.2% (1994) to 18.6% (2007). Who is changing his faith and who is ready to become a finger-pointed person? How does it happen, what dynamic is leading someone to become someone else where there is already a message of hope and a faith? Is Pentecostal conveying a new message?

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<sup>25</sup> BOUTTER 2002, Tibebe Eshete 2009 ... It's also the thesis defended by FANCELLO 2006 underlining that African Pentecostalism's are reflecting since long-time local or national identities transcended by the Christ-like message instead of being agents of the American Evangelism.

<sup>26</sup> COX 1994, p.220.

## WHO IS A “PENTE”?

As previously mentioned the label *Pente* is stuck to any Christian who is neither an Orthodox nor a Catholic. Therefore there is only a part of the *Pente* who is really Pentecostal. Others are protestants-evangelicals.

The main salient features characterizing Pentecostalism is the baptism in the Holy Spirit which is generally accompanied by the glossolalia (the speaking in tongues), an experience that more and more Ethiopians encounter from the 1960's onward. The repression against Pentecostals and the extension of the *Pente* label to all protestants lead the protestants to make the difference between themselves and Pentecostals. Therefore, they have tried to remove charismatic groups from the Evangelical churches and bring a clear distinction between themselves and Pentecostals. But in the reality, the fact is that charismatic doctrines are found among all Christian groups. Furthermore, Charismatic part is growing among all Christians.

Considering that most of Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches are collaborating together, inviting each other in assemblies and church ceremonies, joining the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE), the *Pente* label (or “protestants” in the statistics) reflects the charismatic population. That one point has been clearly demonstrated by our study. Thus, instead of seeking for sub-categories and pinning labels on the board, we will consider a Charismatic Movement in Ethiopia merging with all groups and adopting or practicing a pneumatological liturgy.

## THE CHARISMATIC FACE OF ETHIOPIA

The current state of our information does not allow us to answer clearly some fundamental questions: who -precisely- are members of Pentecostal or charismatic church, that is to say what are the

members' profile; which social layers or nationalities are mostly receiving the Pentecostal message (are they rich or poor, speaking which languages?). What is the age range of people joining them mainly? Do the worshippers definitely cut their link with their former religious community? Where are their churches located and who are the owners of the buildings? How are they financed? What are the enculturation supports?

Considering the data provided by the two above mentioned mega censuses, the Charismatic movement in Ethiopia appears merely a regional phenomenon, even though there is also a slight urban movement. The Charismatic population is clearly located in the South-Western part of the country (SNNPR, Wälläga and Gambela), very few in Southern Oromiyaa (Borana, Gujji) and in Benishangul-Gumuz. Another Charismatic zone is set in highly urbanized cities, Addis Abäba and Bahär Dar. The regions that are traditionally bound with "orthodox Christianity" (North) or with Islam (East) show almost no progression of the Charismatic faith and the *Pente* population in those regions counts for less than 0.5% of all Charismatics.

We believe that there are two different Charismatic movements in Ethiopia. The least is the urban movement that concerns Addis Abäba and Bahär Dar, a movement of New Churches and connected to the Global Pentecostalism. This can be explained by the attraction of a more modern-shaped religion and the community reconfiguration in an urbanized space which is in a complete break with the tradition. For that matter Charismatic movement is not different in Ethiopia than in any other urban areas in the world. The movement in this area concerns only a minority of the Ethiopian Charismatics (approximately 1.5%).

The main Charismatic movement is located in South-West Ethiopia and is a cultural response to issues of identity. SNNPR hosts 60.71% of Ethiopian *Pente* and the West-Oromiyaa about 35%. Almost 96% of the Charismatics of Ethiopia are living in the South-Western part of the country. In Gambela, the Charismatics are 70.1% of the *kallal's*

population but this high score only represents 1.56% of the total Ethiopian charismatic population (and only 0.3% of the national population).

The rise of the Pentecostal/Charismatic is clearly to the detriment of the “Orthodox” Church of Ethiopia and we have clearly identified that the Charismatic movement in Ethiopia is a regional phenomenon. The South-Western part of the country only became Ethiopian since the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century after northern armies led by emperor Mənilək conquered this part of Ethiopia. Then, *kätäma* (garrison towns) were established and a new class of landowners was founded: the *näftäñña* (“gun carrier”) holding the *gäbbar* system (lands granted by the emperor to the officers and soldiers). The local population living on those lands (the *gäbbar* lands) were in the same time put under a rule of feudal duties owned by the newcomer landlord. The resistance had been strong, even still during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Ethiopian “orthodox” Təwahədo Church, like the Amharic language used for any administrative matter, was and remained the sign of the conqueror. In the same time, emperor Mənilək II and especially emperor Haylä Səllase I sent the foreign missionaries (mainly evangelicals) to the South and the West. Not only were these regions not well integrated in the empire yet; but the *Təwahədo* was not really present either. We can notice how fast the evangelical faith has progressed in those regions, especially when missionaries were expelled from Ethiopia by the Italians during the fascist occupation (1936-1941). The spread of Evangelicalism was an action undertaken by locals (mainly the Wälayttas’). No doubt that Evangelicalism was seen as an alternative Christian faith, professed by missionaries that had learned vernacular languages and used translations of the Scriptures (instead of ge’ez like the “orthodox”).

No doubt also, in the logic of the federalization of the old empire’s provinces, that changing his faith is also an identity statement. Of course, the identity is not the sole reason for conversion but we

believe it to be the main one in the South-Western part of Ethiopia, where almost 96% of Charismatics are living.

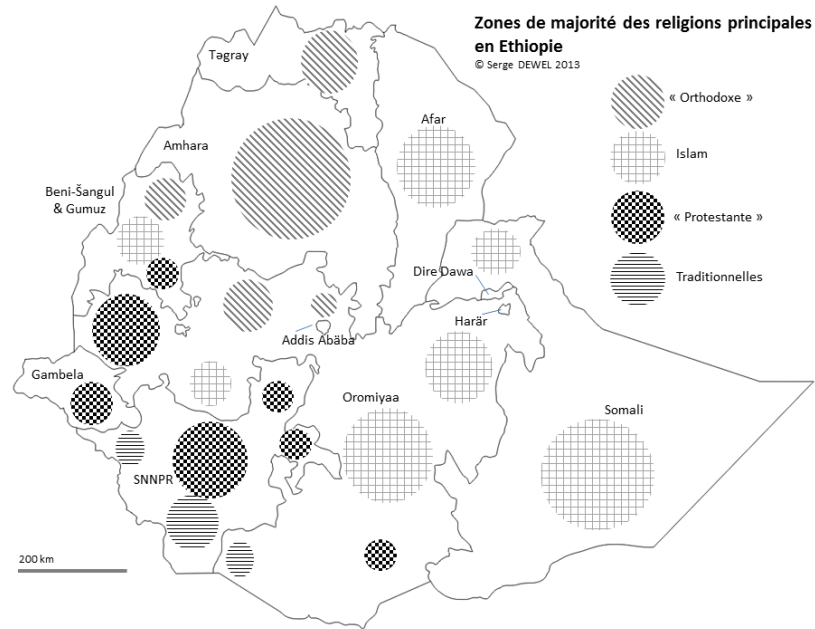


Fig. 1 The major religious trends of the different Ethiopian regions (DEWEL Serge, 2014).

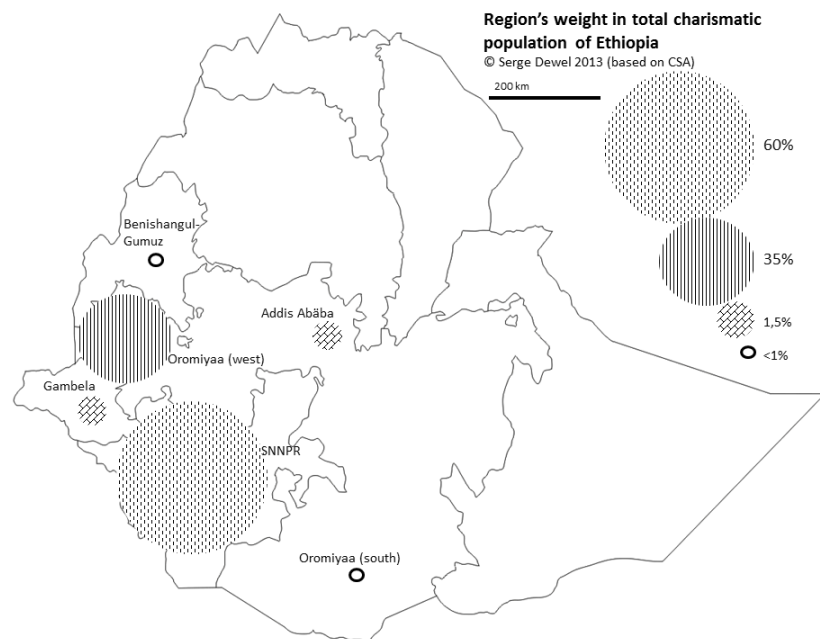


Fig. 2 Region's weight in total Ethiopian Pentecostals/Charismatics population (DEWEL Serge, 2014).

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