

Reading Prayers as Political Texts: Reflections on Irreecha Ritual in Ethiopia

Serawit Bekele Debele

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany

ABSTRACT

On the occasion of religious rituals which mobilise large number of participants, people get together to pray about their socio-political and economic circumstances and concerns. The main preoccupation of this article is analysing prayers said in such contexts. In the act of praying, it is argued that people appropriate religious vocabularies to convey messages in which structures of power and political actors are implicated. As such, focusing on the contents of collective prayers sheds light on our understanding of how subjects make sense of political processes that affect their everyday lives. As will be shown, what makes the linkage between prayers and political subjectivities more interesting is the political context that necessitates the emergence of prayers as sites of political pronouncement. In authoritarian landscapes where explicit political engagement of any sort is made close to impossible, religious rituals, festivals and similar processions serve as alternative sites. In these events, collective prayers constitute a significant part of mediating political thoughts and aspirations. By reading prayers generated from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ethiopia, I will demonstrate that they are political texts deployed by religiously embodied political subjects.

Introduction

Irreecha is an annual thanksgiving ritual performed by the Oromo people in Ethiopia. In this article, I focus on prayers said in the October 2014 celebration to analyse prayers and explore their potential as mediums that give access to political thoughts of people other than powerful politicians and/or educated elites. I chose 2014 due to the fact that Irreecha was performed at a time when political processes in the country took an interesting turn. The ritual was held just a few months after a nationwide protest in opposition to the introduction of the Addis Ababa Integrated Development Master Plan (hereafter Master Plan). To an extent, the year 2014 has been defining in that it shaped subsequent political developments in the country. Among other things, it inspired popular struggle that has been on the decline for sometime and thereby exposed decades of accumulated grievances.

CONTACT Serawit Bekele Debele  debele@mmg.mpg.de  Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Socio-Cultural Diversity, Hermann-Föge-Weg 11, Göttingen, 37073 Germany

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As part of the aggressive urbanisation in Ethiopia after the change of regime in 1991, Addis Ababa, the capital city has been expanding in the last few decades. This necessitated expropriating land from the surrounding farmers and also submerging small towns. An attempt towards a more systematic approach to the expansion of the city was made in 2014 when the Master Plan was introduced. According to this plan, the city was to expand further, a process that entails confiscating land from the surrounding farmers as well as incorporating the booming towns and cities that are within the jurisdiction of Oromia Regional State.¹ This engendered a strong resistance in which the public reacted by protesting on the streets. The introduction of the new plan signalled a climax of popular discontent and provoked a more assertive reaction. The outrage and protest first started by the Oromo youth in Universities and later on extended to high schools and subsequently, the general public also joined the protest rejecting the proposal and opposing the implementation. The concerned authorities handled the protest heavily resulting in the death of civilians and destruction of property. Addis Standard Magazine reported this in its June 2014 issue as follows:

The government, rather than accommodating the reservation of various individuals and groups on the plan or its motive, chose to label those who complained against the plan as working for the so-called obscure 'anti-peace agents'. This was the major reason that led to the widespread protest in many Universities and several towns in Oromia, which claimed the lives of eleven people by the account of the government (other sources put the death as high as 49) and resulted in countless property damages.²

It is crucial to note that the surrounding communities are ethnic Oromo who have historical grievances against successive regimes.

After this incident in April 2014, the atmosphere of the October Irreecha was loaded with fear, disappointment, bitterness and anger as much as it was filled with aspiration and hope. I attended the annual celebration and recorded the prayers. Additional materials were also obtained from an ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2012 to 2016 in the Oromia Regional State of Ethiopia as part of my doctoral and postdoctoral research projects. Interviews with selected individuals, some who participated in the prayer session, group discussions, archival materials, newspapers and online resources were also used to enrich the empirical foundation of the arguments. The paper begins with a short description of Irreecha rituals followed by the content analysis of the prayers. In the final sections, the implications of locating prayers in the political realm and vice-versa will be highlighted.

¹After years of civil war, Ethiopia transitioned to a new regime in 1991 when the ethnic coalition known as Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power. One of the major political solutions sought to address historical problems was experimenting with Ethnic Federalism as a governing framework. Ethnic Federalism was regarded as the remedy to address issues of marginalisation and discrimination of different ethnic groups in the country. It was also believed to solve problems of distribution of political power, economic resources and questions of socio-cultural representation. Ethnic Federalism organised regional boundaries within the larger umbrella of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. One of the regions is the Oromia Regional State which is, at least in principle, an autonomous political entity within the federal arrangement. Oromia is predominantly inhabited by the Oromo people. Majority are followers of either Christianity (of different denominations) or Islam. However, the two religious traditions are highly mixed with the local practices and it is hard to establish that allegiance to either Islam or Christianity excludes previously existing religious practices. There are, however, sections of the population who identify as adherents of the Waqqeeffana religion, named after the creator called Waaqa. The political party that rules the region is called Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and it is a member of EPRDF. At an administrative level, the Master Plan interfered with the autonomy of the regional state as a result of which the ruling OPDO was also resistant.

²Ezana Haddis, 'How Not to Make a Master Plan', *Addis Standard*, 27 June 2014.

Irreecha is a chain of rituals performed to plead with and also extend gratitude to the creator. There are two major annual celebrations; Irreecha Tulu (of hilltop) and Irreecha Malka (of lakeside). The former is held during the dry season to plead with Waaqa (the creator) for, among other things, rain and good agricultural produce. The latter is a thanksgiving ritual that is held when the rainy season is over. Irreecha Malka is a transition to the sunlight and season of harvest, it is a time when the rivers and streams settle and communication among relatives and friends resumes. As a way of appreciating Waaqa's kindness, protection and provisions, it is held to extend gratitude. It is also a moment to pray for abundance, health and wealth throughout the year. Although Waaqa is central, other benevolent spirits known as Ayyana which Waaqa assigned to protect his creatures are also celebrated at Irreecha. The major annual thanksgiving celebration that brings the largest number of participants is the one held at Hora Arsadi, a sacred lake located in the Bishoftu City of Oromia Regional State. Irreecha at Hora Arsadi assembles thousands of participants from different backgrounds from all over the Oromia region and other parts of Ethiopia.³ Apart from prayers, other colourful performances like songs, horse ride, boat trip, birdwatching and similar touristic activities happen to grace the festivity. Spirit possession sessions, coffee ceremonies under the big sacred tree, invocation songs and trance are also the integral, and yet contested, parts of the ritual.

Elsewhere,⁴ I describe and analyse in detail the historical trajectories of the ritual and its emergence as an active part and parcel of contemporary political developments specifically in relation to the Oromo people of Ethiopia. On top of its huge significance as a symbol of ethno-religious identity, it also emerged as a political avenue for different people of different political persuasions. Given its ever increasing popularity and socio-political as well as economic prominence, political dignitaries including the regional state's president attend the ritual and address the public in their speeches. The ruling Oromo People's Democratic Organisation/Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (hereafter OPDO/EPRDF) uses the site as a platform to promote its ideology and political discourses as well as denounce what it regards as 'anti-peace', 'anti-development' and 'ill-meaning' political forces. This makes Irreecha one of the few moments that bring the state officials at the same spot as ordinary participants making it an ideal site and time to forward the everyday concerns of citizens. So, it is not surprising that opposition groups, the youth and the elderly also appropriate it for political expression. Politics at Irreecha has many different manifestations and expressions like bodily decorations, various performances, folksongs and prayers. This has turned Irreecha into one of the most contested and politicised annual celebrations.

One could argue that Irreecha is one of the major occasions and spaces that offer an image of what goes on in the political scene in Ethiopia in relation to the Oromo people and their political demands. In terms of its ability to upset the power relations as lived and experienced in the everyday life of societies, Irreecha can be compared to carnivals as a time relationship between ordinary people and powerful individuals as well as structures of power are inverted. However, of late, it has become a highly regulated and

³Although Irreecha is a ritual that has its roots in the Oromo religious worldview, it is not exclusive to the Oromo. The Amhara, Tigre, Gurage, Wolayta and others from different parts of the country are devoted participants of Irreecha both on the main day of celebration as well as ordinary day small gatherings. Furthermore, although the two are the major ones, it does not mean that the ritual is confined in time and space. It could also be performed at any time anywhere.

⁴I discuss this extensively in my doctoral dissertation titled 'Managing Irreecha: Religion and Politics in post-1991 Ethiopia' (PhD dissertation, University of Bayreuth, 2015). I am turning it to a monograph which will be published by Brill.

securitised space to the extent that ritual participants get searched by security forces on arrival to the sacred lake side. Therefore, unlike the notion of festivities in the Bakhtinian sense of them being sites of ‘ephemeral freedom’,⁵ due to high state regulation Irreecha is not necessarily a space which accords people with the ultimate freedom where they can express themselves and enjoy the festive experience of the ritual. Yet, participants’ subversive performances through mediums like songs and prayers destabilise the seemingly regulated and controlled space. This was vividly manifest in the 2014 ritual performance when prayers reflected the disgruntlement witnesses in the previous months as they also mediated hope and aspiration. They became mediums used by the elderly to raise sensitive political issues, matters which are otherwise no-go-areas at least in the highly regulated Ethiopian political landscape.⁶ This does not, however, mean that prayers became political just this time around. Rather prayers became more explicit in their demand seemingly expecting a swift action in response to what happened in April. Previously, they were more general and subtle while referring to the socio-political and economic well-being of the Oromo society.

Defining Prayer

Situating the conceptualisation of prayer in its socio-political context of production, appropriation and consumption affords a much more rigorous and nuanced picture of its potential. This was first attempted by Marcel Mauss, who established the sociality of prayers in his pioneering work ‘On Prayer’. Mauss contests the thesis on the privacy and inwardness of prayer and argues that prayer, be it performed by an individual or a group of people, has social roots. In so doing, he challenges the theologically rooted assumption that prayer is a solitary practice that mainly attends to the spiritual and psychological needs of the individual.⁷ Others extend this and argue that prayer, both the text and the act can also be political. In this line of thought, Mathew J.P Tan asserts that prayer is ‘in and of itself inherently political in nature’.⁸ Ruth Marshall highlights that prayer is an aspect of ‘embodied forms of inspired speech’ central to ‘political praxis’.⁹ Cynthia Burack further stipulates that prayer is a political text that is used to package and deliver political messages by religious leaders to their audiences.¹⁰ Prayer can be appropriated to interrogate, reproduce and/or contest existing hegemonies. This makes it central to the political sphere as it is at the core of the religious domain.¹¹ Thus, focusing on the content of prayer as well as its context of production, we access meaning making processes as people become innovative in

⁵Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Translated by Helene Iswolsky, 1984).

⁶A detailed account of this can be found also in Debele ‘Managing Irreecha’; Serawit B. Debele, ‘Religion and Politics in Post-1991 Ethiopia: Making Sense of Brayan S. Turner’s “Managing Religion”’, *Journal of Religion, State and Society* 46:1 (2017), pp. 1–17. Serawit B. Debele, ‘Contested Heritage: The “Cul-touristic” Turn in the Celebration of Irreecha Ritual in Ethiopia’ in M. Christian Greene, Rosalind I. J. Hacket, Len Hansen and Francois Venter (eds) *Religious Pluralism, Heritage and Social Development in Africa* (Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, 2017), pp. 21–33.

⁷Marcel Mauss, *On Prayer* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn. Translation of Mauss, 1909, 2003).

⁸Mathew J. P. Tan, ‘Christian Prayer as Political Theory’, *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, 15:3 (2014), pp. 366–379.

⁹Ruth Marshall, ‘Destroying Arguments and Captivating Thoughts: Spiritual Warfare Prayer as Global Praxis’, *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, 2:1 (2016), pp. 92–113.

¹⁰Cynthia Burack, ‘The Politics of a Praying Nation: The Presidential Prayer Team and Christian Right Sexual Morality’, *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, 26:2 (2014), pp. 215–229.

¹¹Peter van der Veer, ‘Special Issue: Prayer and Politics’, *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, 2:1 (2016), pp. 1–5.

conversation with changing political circumstances that shape their subjectivities in multiple ways.¹²

For instance, in their study of the role of public prayer in political mobilisation in Hong Kong, Chan and Law discuss the manner in which prayer is mobilised by various groups to either solicit support or oppose ruling groups.¹³ Drawing on examples from postcolonial Botswana, Pnina Werbner highlights that prayer constitutes part of workers' struggle for their rights. She states that people seek 'spiritual legitimacy' through their active invocation of God to validate their political demands.¹⁴ Analysing prayer in the context of presidential elections in the USA, Cynthia Burack explains the instrumentality of prayer in election campaigns.¹⁵ Among Muslim societies in North Africa, public prayer held on Fridays shapes and is shaped by political processes. In some instances, governments attempt to manage dissident political discourses that find expression in prayer while in others, congregants pray for the government.¹⁶ Although academic works focusing on prayer in its own right are scanty, there are sources, both oral and written attesting to the centrality of prayer in the Ethiopian political setting as well. This is the case partly because of the religious foundation of the country in which the political life of the society cannot be fully grasped without taking the religious into account.¹⁷ Also, among the Oromo, prayer's propensity cuts across every facet of life, be it political, social, cultural, economic and psychological. In one of the earliest sources about the Oromo, it is stated that they conduct collective prayer when they are faced with problems that need supernatural intervention. For instance, De Salviac writes his eyewitness account of a public prayer conducted in 1899 by the Arsi Oromo. Among other things, he notes that they were praying for the restoration of the ancient glory of the Oromo, which at the time was disrupted by invasions from the Christian empire led by Emperor Menelik II.¹⁸ Martha K. Kumsa's work on Oromo who live in Canada that highlights the plea for freedom and justice to prevail in Oromia is another telling instance. Focusing on the ritual performances of Oromo women who live in Canada, Kumsa remarks that prayer for justice, freedom and liberation is central in such gatherings.¹⁹ It is thus safe to argue that

¹²My understanding of subjectivities in this context is informed by Sherry Ortner's (37) definition as 'the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate the acting subjects' which are formed and shaped by historical, cultural social political and economic processes and structures. Ortner also reminds us that we can account for human agency if we pay attention to subjectivities because we get to understand how people re/act in a world that seems to act on them ('Subjectivity and Cultural Critique', *Anthropological Theory* 5 (2005), pp. 31–52).

¹³Shun-hing Chan and Wing-leung Law, 'Public Prayer, Political Mobilization, and Civic Participation: The case of Protestantism in Hong Kong' in Giuseppe Giordan and Linda Woodhead (eds) *Prayer in Religion and Spirituality* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 104–122.

¹⁴Pnina Werbner, 'Political Prayer and the Dignity of Labour', *Anthropology Today*, 32:1 (2016), pp.14–18.

¹⁵Burack, 'The Politics of a Praying Nation'.

¹⁶For instance, Errihani discusses shifts in Friday prayers and rhetoric in some mosques in Morocco. See Mohammed Errihani, 'Managing Religious Discourses in the Mosque: The End of Extremist Rhetoric During the Friday Sermon', *Journal of North African Studies*, 3:16 (2011), pp. 381–394.

¹⁷It is common knowledge that during the battle of Adwa against the Italian colonial advance in 1896, one of the famous statements Menelik II made was to ask those who cannot join to the battlefield, to pray for victory.

¹⁸Martial De Salviac, *The Oromo: An Ancient People Great African Nation* (Paris, 1901. Translated by Ayalew Kanno, 2005). The context he describes is situated in the final years of the twentieth century, the time at which the Christian empire was involved in territorial expansion which eventually resulted in the formation of Ethiopia as we now know it. This is one of the most contested chapters of the country's history and the place of Oromo in the Ethiopian political landscape. If we evaluate the public discourses and the current political struggles of the Oromo, they are largely informed by debates that revolve around 19th and twentieth-century historical developments.

¹⁹Martha K. Kumsa, 'Soothing the Wounds of the Nation: Oromo Women Performing *Ateete* in Exile' in Chima J. Korie and Philomina E. Okeke-Ihejirika (eds) *Gendering Global Transformations: Gender, Culture, Race, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 81–100.

mobilising prayers for collective political concerns has a historical root among the Oromo as it does elsewhere.

A Close Reading of Prayers Said at the 2014 Irreecha Ritual

Any activity during the celebration of Irreecha begins only after the ceremony is opened by the chosen elders who lead group prayers. First, the elders lead the procession towards the shore of the sacred lake, dip the freshly cut grass and sprinkle it on themselves as well as those close by. This is followed by the long session of prayer by the elders representing their respective clans.²⁰ The recitation of prayer in such big gatherings centre on the community in general. The well-being of the Oromo, their cattle, the harvest, the land and other collective socio-political and economic concerns are the major themes. The elders in this context are all men from all the twelve zones within the Oromia Regional State. Their selection is not random. One man is selected from a given clan based on whether, regardless of his age, his lineage is believed to be ‘angafa’ the senior within the clan.

In the October 2014 celebration, sixteen men represented different clans.²¹ All of them were invited to the stage by the Master of the Ceremony and all of them said prayers in the order of their seniority. All the prayers had the conventional opening and closing which basically started and ended with thanking Waaqa for seeing his people through and continuing to do so. The prayers at Irreecha are not constrained by what Luehrmann calls ‘Linguistic conservatism and textual immutability’²² but are open to improvisation and innovation.²³ This created a fertile ground for a free-ride in the way each elder selected the theme to pray about. Accordingly, after the conventional opening, most of their utterances revolved around what happened in April 2014. They invoked the state, the youth, the country, land ownership, self-rule and nationalism to mention but a few broad themes that are intrinsically linked with the issue raised during the protest. In my analysis below, I focus on these major themes. Based on the frequency of their recurrence and for ease of analysis, I have pieced them together as ‘For and about state’, ‘Oromia and Oromo Nationalism’, ‘Wellbeing of the Oromo youth’. As mentioned above, sixteen elders said

²⁰In addition to the applause and the Amen, the body is actively integrated in the prayers. For instance, some people stretch their hands, some others lift their head up and look to the sky, still others bow showing their acceptance of what is being uttered. Although not the scope of this article, the affective dimension of the prayer sessions is another entry point which is productive to analyse emotional experiences of subjects in connection with politics. The manner in which participants react to certain lines of the prayers surely indicates how subjects experience political processes. Paying attention to the responses is also a way to detect how the prayers said by the elderly are received. The 2014 was a clear indication that the participants were moved by what was being said by the leaders of the prayer as it spoke to matters that were close to almost every participant there. People were shouting and jumping every time an elder said a prayer.

²¹It is interesting to observe that prayer has in the last few years become exclusively men's domain. Women are not seen and heard leading prayer which has been the case in the past. If we focus on oral accounts and archives of past ritual performances at Hora Arsadi, we get to see that women have indeed been central to Irreecha more so in leading prayer sessions. They used to perform prayers which theme ranged between childbirth to peace and stability in the country. I discuss this in more detail in my forthcoming book.

²²Sonja Luehrmann, ‘The Politics of Prayer Books: Delegated Intercession, Names, and Community Boundaries in the Russian Orthodox Church’, *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, 2:1 (2016), pp. 6–22.

²³Peter van der Veer seems to suggest that one has to be literate in order to be able to pray because prayer has to be taught and learned. However, this limits the practice of prayer to the elite making it inaccessible to people. Moreover, it denies a room for improvisation and spontaneity which is the case with prayers among communities who are not necessarily followers of the so-called Abrahamic religions. See, van der Veer, ‘Special Issue: Prayer and Politics’.

prayers turn by turn. For the sake of convenience, I use E1 E2 and continue up to E16 (E being elder) to refer to the person whose prayer I am quoting here.

For and about the state

Mootummaan keenya mootummaa nagaya: May our state be a state of peace

Mootummaan keenya nagayaan nurra haabulu: Let our state rule us peacefully

Mootummaan keenya nujala haabulu: Let the state stay under us

Mootummaanillee rabbii duubaan fuulduran rabbii haaqajeelchu: Let Rabi direct our state on the right track

This was a set of prayers E5 said. The major focus in the above set is the state. Although state is a literal translation of the word Mootummaan, it really is used in reference to bodies and processes of governance and administration and how the relationship between the ruler and the ruled is imagined. This line, of peacefully rule us and be under us, is liable at least to two interrelated interpretations about the state. In the first case, the state is recognised as having the power to rule in which case they admit their subordinate position. In the second instance, the state's duties and responsibilities are clearly spelt out in the prayer text. Despite the fact that the state is endowed with the authority to rule, it is as much expected to be accountable to citizens. In this case, it is perceived as one which should be under the citizens because the state is supposed to operate in the interest of the ruled. As such, through the use of prayer, they are calling for more accountability. Even as he condones it, E5 is pointing out that the state has failed to take the ruled seriously. While invoking Waaqa for help, he is also alerting officials that people are aware and critical of what is going on in the country. In the same act of paying for it, he calls out the state and exposes the problems the ruled are facing due to maladministration.

This strand of prayers is rooted in the Oromo notion of political authority that is probably embedded in the Gada institution.²⁴ According to this institution, the duties, roles and responsibilities of those in leadership, and the means of checks and balances are stated and they are also seriously observed. The public's expectation of what the authorities should do emanates from this culturally implanted knowledge of what authorities are expected to do and how they have to do them. Thus, the society's experiences, perceptions and expectations of administration and rule are informed by the historical knowledge, traditions, practices and representations of the current state as well as the Gada institution. From the manner in which the society regards the state, it is clear that they do not only see it as an ensemble of abstract institutions and structures but also as a set of practices that is manifest in the way its officials and authorities perform certain undertakings that affect the lives of citizens on everyday basis.²⁵ Asmerom Legesse's study

²⁴Gada is an institution which organised the political life of the Oromo society in the past. Historically they were administered by it and Gada used to overlook the political, socio-economic and cultural life of the society. Gada is a source of knowledge that informs the elders' understanding of what a good government should be and how it should operate. Based on that knowledge, they critic the regime and also suggest ways to improve. For a detailed discussion on the Gada institution, see Asmerom Legesse, *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

²⁵Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, 'Introduction' in Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (eds) *Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 1–43.

substantiates this where he discusses that among the Oromo there is no such thing as division of religion and politics but rather the religious experts are indispensable to the political life of the society as among other things, a leader cannot be a leader unless he is sanctioned by the religious authority.²⁶ The epistemic foundations in the Gada institution and the experience with the modern state are linked in the ways the men articulate their political thoughts using prayers. Their formations are vital in our understanding of how the seemingly separate spheres of knowledge and experience are merged. The so-called secular, the spiritual, the modern and the traditional dovetail through the agency of the elders and the recipients of their blessings, opening up spaces that challenge existing dichotomies.

The couplets below said by E3 emphasise the centrality of peace and stability and the need for getting rid of the ‘enemy’, perceived or real. Here they are more specific in the demand they extended to Waaqa to make the state stable and to keep the party, which means EPRDF/OPDO on power.

Diina mootummaa keenyaa rabbii haadeebisu: May Rabi keep our state’s enemy at bay

Diina mootummaa keenyaa rabbii haadeebisu: Let Rabi stop enemies of our state

Mootummaa kanatu waliin nugayee mootummaan kun haajiraatu: It is this state that brought us together, let this state live long

Kan uummataaf hojjatuuf hunda isaa haaqajeelchu: Let everything the state does for the people be successful

Waanni inni hojjetu hundi kan uummataaf ta’u akka ta’u rabbii haajedhu.: Let everything the state does be for the good of the people

E3 at this stage is praying for the well-being of the EPRDF/OPDO rule and call for Waaqa’s support to prolong their rule. To this effect, he is praying against the enemies of the ruling party that could possibly threaten the status quo. The man also notes that the state is the main body behind the popularity of Irreecha and asserts that the Oromo are able to celebrate Irreecha the way they do because the party made it possible by granting them the right to promote their religious traditions and colourful culture. In so doing, he implies that the society has to be grateful to the regime because it has delivered on its promises. This text brings to our attention how the government’s self-presentation is mirrored in the vocabularies of the prayer and how such representational rhetoric are appropriated by leaders of the prayer. Moreover, EPRDF/OPDO is known to actively disparage its real or imagined opponents in all platforms insisting that the people should fight against these enemies because they are anti-peace, anti-development and anti-transformation forces. Not only this, everyone is encouraged to stay vigilant also because the exercise of collective political and ethno-cultural rights and the celebration of identities are made possible through the struggle and sacrifice paid by, EPRDF/OPDO. This ‘emancipatory discourse’ in which the government claims that it is a champion of freedom from the oppressive past, succeeds by discursively representing other possible alternatives to the current status quo as threats to national stability. Other political parties than the one on power²⁷ are presented as enemies of the people, a discourse which is shaped in a

²⁶Legesse, Asmerom, *Gada: Three Approaches*.

manner that entices a collective response shuttering any hint of support for and endorsement of such groups. Shaping the discourses around the enemy in such a manner is believed to mobilise the society to actively engage in protecting the current rule and its claimed achievements while at the same time focusing on the anticipatory progress that awaits Ethiopia in the future.

The prayers are uttered along lines that justify the status quo and legitimise the state power while at the same time presenting enemies of the ruling party as ‘enemies’ of the people as well. In this manner, the elders convey a political message in exactly the way the regime wants them to deliver it. One is reminded of Louis Althusser’s notion of religion as an ‘Ideological State Apparatus’ where certain leaders of the prayer session plead with the divine in favour of what appears to be a repressive state. The interplay of the ideological and repressive apparatuses is also vivid in the manner some of the leaders reproduced what the government underscores through its discourses and practices.²⁸ And in their act of beseeching, the elders are reminding the public how much the government is indispensable in keeping the country from disintegration. However, the elders are not simply echoing the ruling party’s ideology. They are also critical of certain issues no matter how subtle they might be. This is, for instance, captured more vividly in the section below where E7 intervenes more radically.

Oromia and Oromo Nationalism

Biyii keenya biyyuma keenya haata’u: May our country be ours only

Kan biyya keenya fudhachuu deemu waaqni nurraa haaqabu: Let Waaqa stop anyone who attempts to take away our country

Oromoon haaguddatuu, kan nutti deemu nurraa haaqabu: Let Oromo grow, let those who are against us stay away

Biyii Oromiyaa kan irraa baqatan osoo hin taanee, kan itti baqatan haataatu: May Oromia be a country people run to not run away from

Guddanneetoo sadarkaa guddaa kan geenyu, nama moonuu nuhaagodhu: May Waaqa develop us to a high level and enable us win

Waaqni kan biyya alaatti yaadnu achumatti hafeetoo, keenyammoo guddina nuuf haakennuu: May Waaqa give us development here and help us to stop aspiring to go abroad

Oromoon bakka maraa jirtu nagayaa, Oromoon kibbaa nagayaa: May the Oromo everywhere have peace

Oromoon gadaatti yaabuluu, gadadoo nuhaalaguu: May our Gada be in place

²⁷For example, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) is one such party that is depicted as the number one enemy. It is an Oromo political party formed in 1974. At the initial stage, it promoted the separation of Oromia and the formation of an independent state. This stance has not always been consistent. However, the party has been fighting for the freedom of the Oromo since its formation. Following the downfall of the military regime in 1991, OLF joined forces with the ethnic coalition, EPRDF, and continued to be part of the political processes for a few years. However, this did not continue as a result of which the rift between the ruling party and the OLF expanded. Finally, following the introduction of the anti-terrorist law in 2009, OLF was declared as one of the terrorist groups. It is depicted as narrow nationalist, anti-unity, anti-peace and stability, anti-development and so on and any association with the party, other than condemning it, will cost a person charge for treason.

²⁸Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)’ in Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (eds) *Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 86–112.

Oromoon wal haajaallatu, tokkummaa keenya nuuf haacimsu: May we love each other and be united

Oromoon haalalisu, afaan keenya tokko nuhaagodhu: May the Oromo flourish and speak one language

Kan Oromoo addaan baasu, kan Oromoo cunqursu waaqni nurraa haaqabu
may Rabi keep away those who divide and oppress the Oromo

Nu uummata tokko nuhaagodhu: May we be one

Biyyaa waliigaleetoo afaan tokoon deemuu kan ta'u nuhaagodhu: Let Waaqa make Oromia a country of agreement, mutual understanding

Oromoo hirree jabeessii, diina nurraa fageessii: make Oromo strong and keep our enemy away

Diina keenya balleessi: Destroy our enemy

Oromiyaan marti nagayaan, Niimisoomnaa, Niiguddannaa: May all of Oromia grow and develop

E7's texts are in active conversation with quite a number of trans/national issues like unity, justice, development, growth, migration, land ownership and autonomy. In his invocation of Waaqa to ensure peace and stability, E7 is implying that these are essential to achieving justice, growth and stability. These conditions are necessary if Oromia is to become a 'country' to which, not from which, people run. This prayer speaks to the disconcerting fact that in the last few decades a large number of Oromo youth have fled their country due to social, economic and political factors that made it difficult for them to survive in the country. Moreover, this corpus mirrors the anger as reflected in the April protest against the Master Plan and the wider questions of self-rule and land ownership. The uproar by the Oromo youth in April 2014 also revolved around opposing the domination of an ethnic minority party.²⁹ This set of prayers reflects the issues raised at the time and also feeds into the ongoing debate regarding the Oromo question for self-determination. It is also interesting to note that the regional state is evoked as 'Biyyi Oromiyaa' which means referring to Oromia as if it is a country in its own right but not as a region within the jurisdiction of the federal state of Ethiopia.

Despite that in the previous section they justify the status quo, here they criticise it and by emphasising the Oromia regional state, the ethno-nationalist sentiment becomes more pronounced while in the previous section, they engage political processes that seem to address, as seen in their invocation of moottuumaa (the state) for example, the country in general. In their usage of Oromia as a country and the attempt to reaffirm nationhood, Orommuma (an articulation of Oromo nationhood) becomes more pronounced than the central state and Ethiopia as a country. This, at face value, gives the impression that they

²⁹Before the introduction of the ethnic coalition, EPRDF, there was Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a party which began its struggle to liberate the Tigrean people. It eventually incorporated other ethnic groups at the time EPRDF was formed. Given that the TPLF has been the main actor in the formation of the ruling party and also its longer history of political struggle, it is accused of dominating the political, the economic and the socio-cultural scene. It is widely believed that there is a Tigrean hegemony in the country and the satellite parties are regarded as surrogate that operate in the interest of the hegemonic Tigrean group. These are reflected in the popular imagination and public discourses that circulate on the social media, other platforms as well as ordinary conversations.

are being Oromo-centric but one has to be careful from offering a conclusive interpretation about their idea of nationhood, country and state since their approach is rather flexible, one that oscillates between the regional and the federal state within the framework of an ambiguous relationship with both. But it is easy to point out that there is an apparent dissonance in the manner the elderly men go about practising their politics through prayer.

Certain vocabularies like ‘enemy’, ‘oppressor’, ‘our country’ etc. hint at the wide held assertion that Oromia is the most fertile land where a great deal of resources come from and yet the people are not enjoying the privileges that their own land offers. Rather, they are displaced by ‘outsiders’; ‘outsiders’ here being historic Abyssinians (Amhara and Tigre). Here, Oromo nationalism and essentialised identity take centre stage in the way historical processes, political grievances and aspirations, social cohesion and economic progress are imagined and articulated. The social, the economic and the political are significantly interwoven as much as historical, local and global forces are, in making sense of and beseeching in the name of the Oromo people. Although the prayers seem to focus on the current issue, it can be observed that they are reflecting the historical questions that have defined the Oromo struggle for many decades. In the prayer-focus, E7 tended to be more Oromo-centric where he insisted on Waaqa’s intervention to help the Oromo to become strong. This ethnocentric sentiment in the narrative is also connected to an ever-intensifying nationalist tendency among the youth, the political and intellectual elite and ordinary people mostly reflected in their writings, political rhetoric, folk songs and other works of art broadcasted in the media. But above all, Irreecha is a crystallisation point for these sentiments.

E7’s prayers do not stop at externalising the matter to the hegemonic political apparatus that is believed to oppress the people. They are also inward looking and critical of the internal dynamics within the Oromo political struggle. In their insistence on speaking the same language, they point to the fact that there are internal developments which are characterised among other things by tension and disunity and they are calling for that to stop. It comes from the understanding that their ‘language’ is not one and hence the urge for consensus. I asked an elder why this line about the same language is highlighted and he replied:

This comes from the fact that there are people who collaborate with the current government—they take part in the killing and looting of the Oromo people. This prayer line is a plea to stop such acts and behaviour. We are one as a nation and anything that stands in the way of our unity has to be stopped. And that is why they pray about it. It means in any form we need to have consensus, unite us, make us one.³⁰

This prayer emanates from observing the diversities and even discrepancies within the Oromo struggle. In a way, it challenges the assumption that homogenises nationalist struggles from which the ‘Oromo question’ also suffers.

Wellbeing of the Oromo youth

Jaarsi nu haa bulu, dargaggoon nu haa bultu, biyya dargaggeessaa/ttii nuu haa godhu: Let the elderly live long, let the youth live long, let Waaqa make us a country of youth.

³⁰Interview with Elemo Hunde, Bishoftu, February 2015.

Waaqni nagahaan akkanumatti guddattaniitoo kan biyya keenya baker keenya butaniitoo kan biyya keenya guddistan isin haa godhu: May you [referring to the youth] grow to develop our country on our behalf

Waaqni akkanumatti bulchitaniitoo sadarkaa guddaa geechaniitoo kan addunyaa mootan isin haa godhu: May Waaqa elevate you to the highest level where you rule over not only your country but the world

Addunyaa kan of jalaa oolchitan isin haa godhu: Let him enable you rule the world

Nagaan mana keenyatti kan gallu nu haa godhu: May we all return home safe and sound

Kan dhibame nu haa maaru, kan du'e jannata haa ga'u: May those sick recover quickly, may the dead rest in peace

Ammallee nama baratteet biyya bulchaa, ijjoollen teenya nuu haa barattu: Only learned people who can rule ... let our children learn and live long

Kan barate nuu haa bulu: Let the learned ones live longer

Dargaggoon nu haa bultu, shamarran nu haa bultu: let the boys and girls live long

Biyya teenyaatti kunoo ijjoollen teenyaa jabaattee baratteet barataan keenya nuu haa bahu: May our children be hardworking and may they flourish in knowledge

Baha nu hin dhoowwin: Let him [Waaqa] not deprive us of success

Biyya keenya kunoo ijjoollen dargaggoon asitti argamtan kuni, kan manatti hafe nagaa haa ta'u

Let those of you who are here return home safely, let him lead them home safely

The excerpt here said by E15 responds to the suffering and pain families and relatives experienced when the army killed unarmed high-school and university students who were involved in the demonstration to oppose the Master Plan. It reflects the agony and anger of families who lost their children and others who live in constant fear after the experience in April 2014. While calling for Waaqa's redemptive intervention, the elderly are delivering messages that are in the hearts of people who were participating in the prayers. They are also bringing it to the attention of political dignitaries who were partaking in the ritual that families and the whole nation are disheartened by the apparent brutality with which the security forces handled the protest. The elders also point out the contradictions at the heart of the regime which focuses and invests on education and then deprives the youth of the right to live. If it is given that a country is built provided that it has sufficient educated human power, killing them, arresting them and forcing them into exile contradicts with the commitment the government shows for development and transformation. Through their performances, the elderly reflect the public's frustration where they point out that there is, after all, a risk to being educated and aspiring for future leadership. The prayers articulate the danger that the educated youth are victims of either detention, persecution exile or untimely death as has been witnessed in the last few decades.

The life of the youth and how the state regards it is one way through which ordinary citizens learn and experience the state. In both the discursive practices of introducing categories like 'adegegna bozene'³¹ using state owned media and deploying violence when the youth go on protest, the state exposes itself to the public as a force to reckon with. When

people are confronted with the state's terrifying presence, they use prayers to extend the 'quest for protection'.³² In their prayer for the youth, the elders implore not only for Waaqa to change the course of events but also for the state which they believe has to measure its actions. Where the state deploys violence as a means to repress and intimidate citizens, those who simultaneously rely on other sources of consolation plead with the divine for solace and remedy. At the same time, this is a political statement that exposes what the Oromo and other people in the country are experiencing in relation to the Ethiopian State. By critically engaging the state through the life of the youth, the elder who led this session also exposed the double face of the regime where on one hand it appears as the provider whereas on the other it is the oppressor who snatches the life of the youth. This contradiction of encouraging the youth and at the same time purging them is at the centre of ambivalences that perhaps characterise political processes in today's Ethiopia.

As can be deduced from the above discussions, there is a wide variety of political issues and not everything the elders say represent politics at least as it happens in Irreecha celebrations. There are quite diverse points raised and even the same idea might have different representation. On the recurring themes in the above prayers, I would like to introduce two perspectives to show how generation and geographical location shapes the articulation and representation of political thoughts within the context of Irreecha celebrations. Observing Irreecha celebrations by Oromo who live abroad and paying attention to the folksongs the youth sing during the celebration in Bishoftu can be used as evidence illuminating these internal dynamics. Unlike the elders who led the prayer sessions, I have learnt that the youth demand a complete replacement of regime or the respect for the constitutional rights to self-determination up to secession. The elders who are saying the prayers communicate the aspirations by calling for restraint and critiquing the ways in which the state relates with the Oromo, the youths follow a rather radical strategy in articulating their political aspirations. While the elders are mild in their strategy and approach, the youth basically sing 'songs of freedom'. Theirs is an appeal to a more fundamental change which hints at some dissonance in the articulations of the elders and the youth. To see what goes among the youth in Ethiopia, focusing on their songs expose the discrepancies between the articulation of political thoughts. Their critique of the current state of affairs, their dissatisfaction with the political atmosphere and their longing for a radical political shift is pronounced. They always question every claim the current government makes about growth, they challenge the manner in which resources and infrastructures are distributed, and above all, they appeal to the Oromo Liberation Front as the alternative that brings meaningful political change for the Oromo people.

This has been clearly reflected in their songs over the years which climaxed in the last three years. The most recent manifestation of the youth's frustration with the regime was what happened in 2 October 2016 celebration of Irreecha which saw the death of hundreds

³¹'adeegna bozene' is an Amharic phrase that was introduced by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in June 2005 when he made a speech transmitted on the national Television. He referred to the youth that protested on the streets of Addis and other big cities in opposition to the results of the 2005 election and the ensuing post-election violence in which the youth were active participants and victims. This expression is one of a kind in dehumanising and reducing the youth to criminals, useless and dangerous and thereby justifying their arrest, torture and death.

³²Michael C. Mason, 'Making the Sacred Real' in Giuseppe Giordan and Linda Woodhead (eds) *Prayer in Religion and Spirituality* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 9–27.

in the event of the celebration. No elderly was able to stop the young man who was running to the stage to take the microphone and chant ‘down down TPLF’ calling for the overthrow of the ruling party. This happened in the face of one of the elderly begging them to calm down.³³

Similarly, most of the diaspora-based Oromo activists, intellectuals and politicians seem to have the total opposite of an imagination in the way they envisage Oromia and its relationship with the state.³⁴ For instance, I have followed up prayers said in Dusseldorf, Germany, London, UK and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Among other things, in the prayers said in these settings, the Ethiopian government is portrayed as an enemy Waaqqa has to destroy. Oromia is imagined as a nation-state awaiting independence from colonial rule. For instance, in the 2012 Irreecha held in Dusseldorf, Germany, an elderly prayed as follows

Mottuman Oromo hadhiatu: let the state of Oromia approach

Hirre dina keynaa habbiittinisu: let our enemy’s strength/might vanish

This line is predicated on the rejection of the current regime and the Ethiopian state. It reflects the frustrations of the politicians and rights activists who regard the Oromo as a nation that deserves an independent state. It comes from the historical assertion that Oromo are made stateless after their incorporation into the Christian highland kingdom in the nineteenth century. It reflects the longing for a state which brings all Oromo together ending their dispersion. It is informed by the need for Waaqqa’s intervention to cripple those who make state-formation a challenge. It manifests that the possibility of the state of Oromia depends not only on their strength but the weakening of the enemy (EPRDF/TPLF) who seems to stand on the way of their struggle. Thus, in addition to the elders’ positinalities and that prayers are prone to improvisation, generational and geographical differences also seem to be central in shaping the way the state is regarded and the ambivalences with which prayers reflect these differences.

The Janus-Face of Prayers

If we look at the above utterances categorised in three broad themes, we can see the Janus-Faced³⁵ nature of the prayers where they are equivocal and cannot be located as outright support or rejection of the whole system and political establishment. They are utterly ambiguous where they seem to maintain the structures of power all at once even when they appear to express defiance and subversion. On one hand, they are critics of the pervasive penetration of the state in the everyday life of societies on another, they demand the divine to keep the state’s enemies away. While acknowledging the ambiguity of prayers, one cannot ignore the political position of the elderly, their experiences with the preceding systems, the current political discourses and how much these factors determine the elders’

³³I analyse this extensively in my forthcoming book on Irreecha and Ethiopian politics since the change of government in 1991.

³⁴I asked a person who lives in the Netherlands what his thoughts are about the prayers said back in Ethiopia. He basically thinks the people back home do not get it. He even said the elderly are just mouthpiece for the regime all they do is echo the government’s discourses and they do not seem to understand the situation although they live there to see the youth suffering.

³⁵James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p.170.

ambivalent utterances. Moreover, the regional state solicits their support as it is also a patron of the celebration that attends to the expenses required to transport the representatives from all over the regional state. This involves a certain kind of relation with the state, where the political economy of invitation necessitates some degree of subtlety, if not complete conformity, on the side of those who pray. But at the same time, one cannot simply reduce their positionality as conformists to the existing order because they are supported by the structure. Instead, we need to carefully tease out the nuances of how they use their relatively privileged place. For instance, their invocations of Oromia as a country and their continuous enactment of Oromo nationalism beg for a closer attention to their oscillating political positions. The elders are emerging as strong critics of the status quo from within as much as they also represent other seemingly radical political imaginations about Oromia as a nation state, however, less militantly. If it were for the repressive nature of the regime that appears to be sensitive to popular reflections on the political goings in the country, the elderly would have been outright victims of censorship. They are guarded by their ambivalent position vis-a-vis the ongoing political processes in the country together with the room to improvise prayer texts makes them immune to censorship and open to creativity.

We cannot also underestimate the fact that, through their prayers, the elderly inspire the spirit of resistance and revolution against the apparent authoritarian political set up in as much as they could also mobilise support for the status quo. If we situate prayers within the framework of what James Scott calls everyday forms of resistance, the texts analysed above are scripts through which messages of discontent are transferred from the subordinated.³⁶ Responding to a crisis situation, they speak to the heart of the matter in a way that either creates or strengthens certain sentiments against the existing political set up. We have seen that as much as they pray to praise and show gratitude, the praying subjects challenge the creator's and state's indifference to their plight. In this context, prayer is a discursive practice that is employed to air dissidence against the seeming orthodox, dominant and hegemonic political apparatus in current Ethiopia. From the above exposition, one can infer that prayers are also manifestations of a potential disjoint between the ruled and the rulers. They also expose the vulnerability of the seemingly stable political order showing that it is susceptible to rupture regardless of how established it appears to be. Nevertheless, that is not all prayers are for when they enter the political domain, they are also used to praise the system and also plead with the gods for the perpetuation of the political order. Furthermore, in the act of praying together, they create bonds, in which politicians are implicated, as they focus on a common theme, concentrate on the performance and the shared experiences, vocabularies, spaces and aspirations which unite and strengthen the community ties. If, as is the case in the Irreecha celebrations, officials and other politicians are present at the time the prayers are said, the bond extends to them as well and whether they like it or not, they become part of the community that has been created through the act of collective prayer. They are present as recipients of the messages and critics that are forwarded by the elders and approved by the ritual participants.

To see prayers as Janus-Faced is more productive as it allows us to investigate the complexities, contradictions and tensions that characterise the interaction between regimes

³⁶Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

and the people they rule. It is in these ambivalences that the elderly also find protection even when they dare to touch the sensitive political matter. Thus, one has to be careful not to simplify prayers as mere tools appropriated by the powerless for showing resistance and for critiquing the existing order. It is apparent that prayers are a 'neither-nor' site. Rather, as shown in my foregoing analysis, they oscillate between praising and hence symptomatic of an accommodative gesture and criticising regimes which carries the tone of demanding changes. Thus, prayers are arguably an embodiment of ambivalences that characterises most political practices in the country.

Conclusion

Finally, prayers widen the notion of the political and where else to locate it. What we gather from reading prayers as political texts is that there are newly emerging ways of articulating political thoughts and responses which are evolving from the socio-cultural and spiritual repertoire of societies over the years. This indicates the dynamic and ever changing nature of doing politics other than the conventional state, civil society and party oriented practices.³⁷ Beyond the attempt to appeal to a higher being, payers also help us understand a wider and complex phenomenon like politics as made sense of by people in such celebratory contexts like rituals. Prayer brings out an alternative possibility of not only knowing but also doing politics where the elderly bring together seemingly contradictory categories; mobilising spiritual artefacts to engage what appears to be a secular politics. Analysing prayers as political texts and the public performance thereof is a compelling way of acknowledging the agency of ordinary people in appropriating religious spaces and resources to make sense of and respond to their socio-political conditions. We get to observe how subjectivities are formed and/or insert themselves into the political realms that seem to passivise them.

As spiritual artefacts that are prominently present in the everyday life of societies, prayers also offer access to a popular representation of the state and its operations vis-a-vis its own self-presentation. Prayers emanate from the spiritual foundation of knowledge which the secular is in constant struggle to displace in the interest of what appears to be rational and sensible. However, as Tan argues, prayers 'should be revolutionary in that [they] should resituate all political possibilities by repositioning them in a new polis' to the extent that they challenge and unsettle

the secular status quo because secular politics in a context of postmodernity sets all political possibilities within one nexus of political relations, comprising the individual, the bordered nation state and the global market. This is a nexus that privileges certain forms of (secular) knowledge as objective and thus normative for public knowledge, and subordinates other (religious) forms of knowledge as merely subjective and optional for public life.³⁸

The knowledge and power state politicians hold on to and establish as monumental are debunked by the subjects through their innovative strategy that offers them access to what seems to be withdrawn from the lives of societies. Thus, paying attention to prayers in relation to political developments offers an empirical and theoretical ground to further

³⁷Michael Neocosmos, 'Thinking Political Emancipation and the Social Sciences in Africa: Some Critical Reflections', *African Development*, 39:1 (2014), pp. 125–158.

³⁸Tan, 'Christian Prayer as Political Theory'.

problematise the Weberian notion of politics as a vocation that has nothing to do with religion because it is differentiated, rationalised and disenchanted. We can see that the 'political' does not exist out of the everyday sensibilities and experiences of ordinary citizens. It is a lived reality and hence accessible through mediums such as prayers so much as prayers cannot be located out of the political, social, historical and cultural contexts of the praying subject. People's experiences with the socio-political formations as orchestrated by the political apparatus and actors are expressed by mobilising prayers and thereby shaping those processes in their own ways. The performance of political thoughts and practices as they are manifest in prayers are indications of the fact that the political and religious life of societies are intimately linked. Prayers are not detached from the political life of societies but they shape and are shaped by efforts to make sense of structures of power. In this article, I have attempted to show that the two are rather mutually co-constitutive.

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