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Article

KUMLACHEW

SURVIVAL IGNORED? ETHIOPIAN MEDIA'S FRAMING OF THE TERROR ATTACK AGAINST ETHIOPIAN
CHRISTIANS IN LIBYA

Survival Ignored? Ethiopian Media's Framing of the Terror Attack Against Ethiopian Christians in Libya

Sileshie Semahagne Kumlachew

PhD research fellow, History, philosophy and religion, University of Agder, 402863

Kristiansand, Norway

sileshie.s.kumlachew@uia.no

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Abstract

The paper explores whether Ethiopian media report on the religious reasons behind the terrorist attack against 30 Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church (EOTC) followers in Libya in 2015. A framing analysis of newspaper articles reporting on the event reveal that the religious identity of the victims, and the religious justification for the massacre, have been suppressed, and it has been presented as a common, criminal offence, and political act. The government is found to be the dominant framing force creating and shifting public opinion in the reports, while the EOTC's

influence is found to be restricted. The state newspaper *Addis Zemen* shows favoritism towards the government in its framing of the event. The private newspapers are critical of this favoritism. It is found that journalists' perceiving that secularism means writing articles and news reports that are free of religion, and anti-EOTC rhetoric that has been voiced by consecutive governments since the 1970s appear to be contributing factors to this framing negligence.

Keywords survival – framing – power relationship – Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church

1 Introduction

It is repeatedly argued that Ethiopia's further development and modernization require a return to the religious roots that were part of the founding of the nation ([Messay, 1999](#); [Meskerem, 2014](#)). [Messay \(1999\)](#) calls this "survival." Such a return entails recognizing religion and religious traditions in the public sphere, such as the news media. Due to secular media practices that do not take this into account ([Sileshe, 2018](#)), and due to less attention being paid to the preservation of the Ethiopian tradition, religion is becoming more and more neglected in the public eye.

The presence and presentation of religion in the Ethiopian media has been recently studied by some scholars (e.g., [Berhanu, 2013](#); Henok, 2013; [Gagliardone et al., 2016](#); [Sileshe, 2018](#)). This paper is a contribution to the interdisciplinary field of media, politics, and religion in the Ethiopian context, where the traditional socio-cultural and political systems are seen in relation to the identity of the nation, and where the supplanting of these belief and traditional systems has led to a decline in development ([Messay, 1999](#)).

By analyzing how three secular Ethiopian newspapers (*Addis Zemen*, *Addis Admass* and *Reporter*) frame the brutal massacre of 30 Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church (EOTC, hereafter) followers in Libya by the Islamic State (IS) international terrorist group in 2015, the aim in this paper is to examine the degree to which religion is presented in the national media. Another aim

is to investigate the power relationships between the Ethiopian government of the time and the EOTC when it comes to the way the massacre was framed. The EOTC is a change-resistant Church that has preserved and maintained the Ethiopian tradition for centuries ([Binns, 2016](#)). Hence, religion's presence or absence and its position in the media following the event of the massacre reveal the extent to which this tradition is maintained. Do the reports in the three newspapers clearly show the identity of the EOTC, its murdered members, and the intention behind the attack? To what extent is the religious aspect reflected? How powerful are the government and the EOTC in framing the event?

1.1 The Massacre of Christians in Libya

On 19 April 2015, the international terrorist organization – Islamic State – released a 29-minute-long propaganda video entitled *Until There Came to Them Clear Evidence* on the social media of the Libyan branch of the Islamic State ([Kareem, 2015](#)). The video depicts the killing of 30 Ethiopians, where half of them were brutally beheaded by masked militants on a Mediterranean beach. In a different setting, a desert landscape, the other half were shot in the back of the head. Before each person is murdered, they are seen with their hands tied behind their backs and kneeling in front of one of the masked slaughterers holding a knife (in the beach setting) or holding a rifle to the back of the head (in the desert setting). The video was intended for what the narrator in the footage calls “the nation of the cross,” with a message of vengeance, stating “Muslim blood that was shed under the hands of your religion is not cheap.” Providing a religious justification for the massacre, the video makes it clear that the killing of the Christians was further justified because these individuals refused to convert to Islam and declined to pay a protection tax in territories captured by IS ([Kareem, 2015](#)).

In the same video, the Christians are labeled as “worshippers of the Cross belonging to the hostile Ethiopian church.” They are also described as “crusaders” whose aim is to kill Muslims. Considering the fact that these Ethiopian Christians were killed because they refused to change their religion, at its meeting held on the 6 May 2015, the Holy Synod of the EOTC granted them the title of “Martyrs of the 21st Century,” together with Egyptian Christians killed in a similar way on 15 February 2015 (Hara ZeTewahido, [2015](#)).

The news of the massacre was received by many Ethiopians with shock and grief, a reaction that was expressed through public demonstrations, both domestically and abroad, and through nationwide mourning. The government, political parties, and religious institutions also actively denounced the massacre, calling for the Ethiopian people to stand together and combat societal ills, such as terrorism and illegal migration ([Dulin, 2017](#)). A content analysis of Facebook postings responding to the massacre reveals that the massacre appears to have brought together the various ethnic and political groups in Ethiopia and the online communities that do not normally agree on issues ([Gagliardone et al., 2016](#)). The print, broadcast, and social media widely covered the event ([Gagliardone et al., 2016](#)).

1.2 The Ethiopian Religious Landscape and the EOTC

According to the online population predictor Worldometer, the Ethiopian population is slightly over 125 million people – making it the second most populous country in Africa and the eleventh in the world ([Worldometer, 2023](#)). According to the most recent population censuses, conducted in 1984 and 2007, over 95 percent of the Ethiopian population belong to Christianity and Islam. In the 2007 census, it was found that 44 percent adhere to the EOTC, 34 percent are Muslim, and 19 percent belong to Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestant groups.

In the past thirty years, much has changed in terms of the composition of the religious groups in the country. Between the last two censuses there had been a 10 percent decline in followers of the EOTC (from 54.02 percent of the total in the 1984 census to 43.5 percent in 2007). Muslims' percentages in the two censuses remained consistent with 32.9 percent and 33.9 percent, respectively. The Protestant denominations, on the other hand, grew by about 13 percent (from 5.48 percent in 1984 to 18.6 percent in 2007). The remaining figures account for followers of Catholicism, traditional or Indigenous, and other minority religions.

The EOTC was a state Church for over sixteen centuries (from 330 to 1974). Historically, the Church has played a leading role in founding the Ethiopian nation through its religious ideals, educational outlook, and administrative guidance. This trend, however, ended after the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie (1931–1974), who initiated the separation of the EOTC from the state with the motto “ሃይማኖት የግል፣ አገር የጋራ” which means “religion is for the individual, country is for all” (Ermias, 2005). The communist government, the Derge, which overthrew the imperial government of Haile Selassie in 1974, formally disestablished the EOTC and confiscated church holdings (Eide, 2000; Binns, 2017). This government was then ousted in 1991 by an ethno-federalist and secular coalition called the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In the modern era, the EOTC has lost “its head, its land and income, as well as its position in the nation and its role as national educator” (Binns, 2017, p. 232).

Both the Derge and EPRDF governments marginalized the EOTC as they feared that it had potential political power (Abbink, 2003). Since the time of the communist government, keeping the EOTC under control has been seen as “a necessary precondition for anyone wanting to rule Ethiopia” (Eide, 2000, p. 162). Dividing the country into nine ethno-linguistic states, the EPRDF ruled the country until 2018. During this period the EOTC was the target of a surreptitious attack

by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a dominant political party in the EPRDF government. Aregawi Berhe, one of the founders of the TPLF, admitted that cognizant of the Church's structural potential on the village-society level to unify the country, the TPLF was trying to subordinate it to protect its own ethnic-based separatist cause ([Aregawi, 2008](#), p. 301). Using communism and ethnicism as ruling paradigms, the Derge and EPRDF governments, respectively, labelled the Church as a tool used by previous governments to oppress non-Christians ([Solomon, 2021](#)). This narrative is the root of the ongoing epistemic and physical attack against the Church.

Today, Ethiopia is a secular state where the constitution in force clearly stipulates separation of religion and state. However, the secular state is blamed for its failure to appropriately recognize different religious traditions in Ethiopia ([Abbink, 2014](#); [Mohammed, 2016](#)). The government, not an independent court, is the sole granter and arbiter on religious matters, defining what they are and interfering in religion on obscure grounds ([Abbink, 2014](#), p. 359). The specifics of and limits on religion's place in the public sphere is also ambiguous, which is then the source of repeated conflict between religious traditions and the state ([Abbink, 2014](#); [Mohammed, 2016](#)) and between religious traditions (Abbink, 2011).

1.3 Mass Media and Religion in Ethiopia

A review of the recent history of modern Ethiopian mass media reveals that in most cases, the media have served the interests of the governments in power ([Meseret, 2013](#); [Biruk and Singh, 2018](#); [Menychle, 2020](#)). The Ethiopian media is typified by strong state dominance where journalists working in the state media have a subservient position (Skjerdal, 2012). When journalists working both in the private and state media report on stories involving religious or ethnic conflicts, they often fear repercussions and practice self-censorship ([Mulatu, 2017](#)). The

private press that is known to be hostile to the Ethiopian state is greatly impeded by economic challenges, urban concentration, and limited professionalism ([Shimeles, 2000](#); [Shimeles, 2002](#)).

Religion is often reported during public religious holidays and when events are too big to ignore and is a supporting theme – not an independent one – when covering such issues as peace, security, tourism, development, and national integration ([Sileshie, 2018](#)).

2 Theoretical Framework: the Theory of Survival

This paper uses the theory of survival by [Messay \(1999\)](#) as a theoretical framework. The concept has been developed by Messay Kebede, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Dayton, USA. He has published articles and books on modernity, societal change, and African and modern Western philosophy. In his book entitled *Survival and Modernization: Ethiopia's Enigmatic Present – A Philosophical Discourse*, [Messay \(1999\)](#) claims that the history and institutions of a country should be understood in terms of the survival of its belief and value systems. He defined survival as “a goal, a deep-seated drive, ... the steering wheel of all human efforts” ([Messay, 1999](#), p. xvi).

Survival is, thus, the maintenance, protection and return to the value and belief systems that give a country a unique identity. Taking Ethiopia's long years of recorded survival history that enabled its independence, Messay considers it a prime example for survival. The country has gone through several ups and downs to preserve its values intact across generations. This process has, however, been in a state of decline since the twentieth century when poverty and political instability threatened its very existence. Messay argues that the decline is due to the ignorance of the Ethiopian belief and value systems that gave the country an identity and their replacement by alien socio-cultural and political institutions and value systems. This claim is cleverly elaborated by [Meskerem \(2014\)](#) who concluded that the political, social, economic, cultural, religious, and

educational direction of twenty-first-century Ethiopia is deeply impacted by anti-Ethiopian ideologies. To survive and prosper, both Messay and Meskerem call for the return to the religious root in the socio-cultural and political sphere.

One way of approaching survival is to assess the extent to which the mass media, as powerful institutions that promote values, entertain the religious aspect when it is deemed important to report religion. The relationship between major actors in the media, the state and the EOTC in this case, also help to see the survival of tradition. How related are the two institutions in the media in the case of the massacre? The case of the massacre story of the EOTC followers in the media, thus, illuminates the state of the Ethiopian value and belief system in contemporary Ethiopia. It is important because the Church continues to be the majority and is crucial to the building of the Ethiopian state project.

3 Framing Analysis and Power Position in Framing Religion in the Media

Framing analysis has been one of the main approaches for studying media's portrayal of religion. In media and religious studies, framing analysis goes beyond just presenting content on some aspects of religious events. It also contributes to shaping public opinion on religious traditions ([Stout and Buddenbaum, 2003](#)). It is the study of how people or journalists organize events to give coherent meaning to everyday reality ([Goffman, 1974](#)). The process the journalists use in selecting, ignoring, and highlighting certain aspects of stories or events involves framing ([Entman, 2003](#)). The opinions that people develop and the actions that they take are, thus, largely influenced by media framing ([Stout and Buddenbaum, 2003](#)).

There are three categories of studies on media framing analysis internationally. The first focuses on how terrorist incidents are framed by the media by examining the actors and how the framing influences public perception as well as government policy and actions (Powell, 2011;

[Powell, 2018](#); [Reese and Lewis, 2009](#); [Powell and Abadi, 2003](#); [Rane, Ewart and Martinkus, 2014](#)). The second category focuses on the tension between the religious and the secular worldviews in the way journalists frame events involving religion ([Moore, 2003](#)). The third emphasizes how certain religious traditions are framed or portrayed in the press ([Chen, 2003](#); [Mann, 2016](#); [Ostrowski, 2006](#)).

This research integrates the three approaches to examine the framing of an international terrorist act involving religion in the secular media where there are such competing forces as the Ethiopian government, private and public media, and the EOTC.

The issue of who frames the media message is highly significant in the framing process. According to [Pan and Kosciaki \(1993\)](#), politicians and interest groups are becoming increasingly proactive in influencing media framing – as are journalists. The political climate under which the journalists and other media stakeholders work, government policies, the perception of journalists, expectations of media organizations, and readership needs are some of the factors that affect media framing. In other words, all stakeholders involved in policy issues – politicians, the media industry and, the greater public – are active players in framing events and constructing meaning in the media ([Neuman, Just and Crigler, 1992](#)).

4 Methodology

The researcher undertook a content analysis of coverage of the massacre in three Ethiopian newspapers: *Addis Admass*, *Addis Zemen* and *Reporter* (all in the Amharic language). *Addis Admass* and *Reporter* are privately owned. *Reporter* began on September 11, 1995, while *Addis Admass* started publishing in 2000 ([Mihret, 2016](#)). While *Addis Admass* is published every Saturday, *Reporter* comes out twice a week. These two are popular and are the most stable private newspapers in the Ethiopian media market ([Biruk and Singh, 2018](#)). *Addis Zemen*, on the other

hand, is the oldest surviving national state-owned daily newspaper. It has been published in Amharic since 1941 ([Tegegne, 1961](#)).

These three newspapers have been selected based on readership, durability in the market, and content. Compared to other surviving newspapers in Ethiopia, these three are the most widely read newspapers in the country ([Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority, 2013](#)). When it comes to content, the three newspapers focus on political, economic, and societal issues.

These publications have also been selected because they represent the two types of Ethiopian media based on ownership: private and state-owned. Given the political climate under which the Ethiopian media operate ([Meseret, 2013](#)), *Addis Zemen's* position tilts more towards government interests than the privately owned newspapers do.

The researcher has used a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. To avoid exclusive reliance on numbers or subjectivity, as in the positivist (quantitative) and interpretivist (qualitative) traditions, content analysis is recommended as it combines the two (Oleinik, 2011). The researcher has integrated the two approaches here as this serves the research purpose well.

In this paper, all the articles (news, editorials, commentaries, and letters to the editor) that mentioned the slaughter of Christians in Libya and were printed in the three newspapers between April 21 and May 2, 2015, are looked at. The researcher observed that the number of articles on the issue decreased over time as another agenda, the 2015 general Ethiopian election, received more attention on the newspapers' pages.

Framing analysis is used to analyze the contents of the newspapers. One of the categories used is type of article (news report, feature article, editorial, commentary column, letter to the editor). The study has looked at every variety since it provides a complete picture of the framing.

Another category is reference, meaning the way the articles label the murdered Christians (Ethiopians, Christians, innocent citizens, immigrants, victims, etc.). A third category is the reason mentioned for the massacre, which refers to whether the article gives a religious or another political reason for the killings (have these people been killed because of their religion, or are there other political reasons, such as illegal human trafficking, behind the massacre?). The fourth category is perspective, which refers to the way in which the event is viewed – from a religious angle where religion is a major element in the story or a secular perspective considering the event as a political act. Lastly, the power relationships between the sources – the government, the newspapers and the EOTC – are considered.

5 Data Presentation and Discussion

5.1 Number and Type of Articles

Within twelve days after the Ethiopian journalists first learnt of the killing of Ethiopian Christians in Libya, the three newspapers had produced 74 articles on the issue (see [Table 1](#) below). Of the 74 articles about the massacre, the oldest surviving daily state-owned newspaper, *Addis Zemen*, published 43 of them (58%), whereas the privately owned newspapers, *Reporter* and *Addis Admass*, published 24 (32%) and seven (10%) articles, respectively. One possible reason for the relatively small number of articles in the two privately owned newspapers can be their frequency of publication. While *Addis Zemen* is a daily paper, *Reporter* is a bi-weekly and *Addis Admass* a weekly newspaper.

The highest proportion of article types in the three newspapers was news: half (37) of the of 74 articles. Of the total 37 news reports dealing with the massacre, 25 (68%) are found in *Addis Zemen*, 10 (27%) in *Reporter* and two (5%) in *Addis Admass*. Publishing frequency seems to be a determinant factor for the proportions here as well. It is not surprising that the daily newspaper,

Addis Zemen, with the possibility of providing daily updates, has many more news reports on the massacre. *Reporter* also has more possibilities for providing news updates as a bi-weekly, whereas *Addis Admass*, has other types of coverage (letters to the editor) than news reports as the news can quickly become “stale” when publishing only once weekly.

The letter to the editor is the second largest type of coverage on the massacre, accounting for a fifth (15) of the total. Of these 15 letters, *Addis Zemen* published 6 (40%), and *Reporter* and *Addis Admass* published 5 (33%) and 4 (27%), respectively. As indicated in the table below, over half of the total proportion of articles from *Addis Admass* (4 out of 7) are letters to the editor. In both *Addis Zemen* and *Reporter*, the second highest coverage type – next to news reporting – is also the letter to the editor. The fact that all the three newspapers focus more on opinions from writers with different views indicates that the issue was controversial, and that the media invited a variety of view from external sources (writers of letters to the editor) rather than relying on their own reporting. The media, especially the private ones, seem to avoid the subject by encouraging more and more outsiders to write letters to the editor about it. They stay away from writing on contentious issues involving interactions across religions. Additionally, they avoid discussing how the government and religious institutions interacted following the incident. This implies that the media are probably torn between the interests of the government and the competing religious groups. This may also be related to the journalists’ limited knowledge and resources when it comes to reporting on religious issues in Ethiopia ([Sileshie, 2018](#)).

The total number of articles written as commentary columns (9) in the newspapers is only one number higher than for editorials (8). While *Addis Zemen* and *Reporter* presented an equal number of commentaries – four (44% each) – in their column section, *Addis Admass* had only one commentary on the issue in the same section. *Addis Admass* did not also cover the issue in its

editorial and feature sections. On the other hand, *Addis Zemen* devoted five editorials and *Reporter* devoted four to the massacre. This indicates that both *Addis Zemen* and *Reporter* allotted more proportional space to the issue in their editorial section. All three consecutive *Reporter* newspaper issues that have been examined for this study devoted all the editorial sections to the massacre. *Addis Zemen* also devoted half of its editorials to it. This implies that the two newspapers found enough space to reflect their own position on the issue.

The feature article is the least presented article type in the newspapers. Only three of *Addis Zemen* and two of *Reporter* articles are feature articles. This implies that the newspapers had no intention of digging deeply into the subject or exploring it from both a religious and political point of view. This is also related to the journalists' perception on reporting on religion and the lack of appropriate knowledge and skills in the treatment of the subject matter (Sileshie, 2018).

TABLE 1 Distribution of newspaper input by type of coverage.

Type of story	<i>Addis Admass</i>		<i>Addis Zemen</i>		<i>Reporter</i>		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
News report	2	5.4	25	67.6	10	27	37	50
Editorial	0	0	5	62.5	3	37.5	8	10.8
Feature article	0	0	3	60	2	40	5	6.8
Commentary	1	11.2	4	44.4	4	44.4	9	12.1
Letter to the editor	4	26.7	6	40	5	33.3	15	20.3
Total	7	9.5	43	58.1	24	32.4	74	100

5.2 Reference to the Christian identity

The way in which the newspapers identify the religious identity of the victims reveals how the religious aspect is framed in the media. Interestingly, except for *Addis Admass*, the other two newspapers do not identify the religious identity of the victims. Statistically, more than nine out

of 10 articles do not mention the Christian identity of the victims. The newspapers prefer to call them “Ethiopians,” “innocent civilians,” “Ethiopian migrants,” “Ethiopian citizens,” “fellow Ethiopians,” and “our brothers,” always avoiding the designation “Christians” and “Orthodox Tewahdo.”

On the other hand, a feature article published by *Addis Zemen* on April 22 entitled “The Killing of Ethiopians Denounced Internationally” identifies the Egyptian citizens who were killed in a similar attack by IS in Libya earlier in 2015 as Christians, while ignoring the Christian identity of the Ethiopians. Only in a few instances do the newspapers mention the Christian identity of the victims. *Addis Admass* is more direct in this regard, as four of the six articles that explicitly refer to the identity of the victims, mention their religious identity.

Generally, the findings suggest that none of the three newspapers clearly reveal the Orthodox Tewahdo Christian identity of the martyrs.

5.3 Reason for the Massacre

In explaining the reason behind the massacre of the Christians in Libya, the three newspapers seem to agree on seeing the attack as a common, criminal, and political act, thus finding a secular reason behind it. A little over half of all the coverage in the three newspapers explicitly relates the massacre to the question of gaining political power or to terrorism, expressly ignoring religion as a reason (see [Table 2](#) below). In many instances (39.2%), the writers of the articles have chosen not to deal with the underlying reason behind the killing of Ethiopian Christians in Libya. Only a few articles (6.7%) mention religion as a potential reason for the massacre. This means, in sum, that over 9 out of 10 articles either relate the massacre to secular, political intentions or have not mentioned a reason for it.

Again, given the prominence of the religious aspect in the sources, for example the perpetrators' video and EOTC's declaration of martyrdom, the failure to mention the religious aspect in the newspapers suggests a deliberate choice to avoid it. In almost all the coverage, the papers have ignored mentioning the fact that in their propaganda video the perpetrators claim that they have killed these people because they belong to the "Nation of the Cross," have Muslim blood on their hands, and have refused to either convert to Islam or pay a protection tax. This is due to the fact that historically, Ethiopia is a Christian nation known for keeping its Christian identity intact for many years even though Islamic political influence is expanding around it ([Messay, 1999](#)).

In a commentary column entitled "Human Wickedness and Human Sanctity in Libya," *Addis Admass* includes photographs of some Eritrean migrants in Libya who were also arrested by IS forces but were released because some stated, in Arabic, that they were Muslims and concealed their Christian identity, while others agreed to convert to Islam (published on April 25).

As mentioned above, there are five articles from the three newspapers that relate the massacre to the underlying reason that the victims appear to be Ethiopian Christians. In a feature article with the headline "Yes, We Feel Sorrow: the Blood of Our Brothers Is Still Calling Us," *Addis Zemen* explicitly mentions the reason for the killing of the Ethiopian Christians. The article quotes the Associated Press and refers to the 29-minute video released by IS to explain that the Ethiopian Christians were killed because of their religion. Three more articles in *Reporter* also mention the religious reason that IS gave to justify the killing of people in general and Ethiopians in particular.

A news story published on April 26 gives a general scholarly impression about the ambition of IS and in that way implies the religious justification for the massacre by highlighting this goal

of creating a strong Islamic State ruled strictly under Sharia law. A commentary column published on April 26 mentions the religious justification for the killing in relation to a critique of the government and EOTC leaders who are blamed for engaging in illegal migration and voicing terrorist rhetoric without clearly identifying the driving forces behind both processes. The same story also raises concern about the potential terrorist acts in Ethiopia that may be linked to IS, such as the killing of Christians in one of the western parts of Ethiopia (Jimma) where some radical Muslim elements are found. Elaborating on the views of an internationally known Muslim scholar (Fethullah Gülen), who openly criticizes Islamic extremists based on the teaching of the Qur'an, a third text (letter to the editor) demands that Ethiopian Muslim scholars denounce the killings by IS. Even though few in number, the three articles in *Reporter* clearly point to the religious justification given for the massacre and thus raise related issues concerning the threat of domestic terrorism, the mismanagement of this issue by the government and religious leaders, and the silence of Muslim scholars. However, compared to the general context, there are few articles dealing with the religious background of the massacre. Other political reasons appear to overshadow the religious reason for the massacre.

TABLE 2 Distribution of reasons given for the massacre of Ethiopian Christians in Libya.

Reason for the	<i>Addis Admass</i>		<i>Addis Zemen</i>		<i>Reporter</i>		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Religious	1	14.2	1	2.3	3	12.5	5	6.7
Political	3	42.9	25	58.1	12	50	40	54.1
Not	3	42.9	17	39.6	9	37.5	29	39.2
Total	7	100	43	100	24	100	74	100

5.4 Perspective

Perspective is another important issue that shows the framing of the story. As indicated in the table below, almost all coverage dealing with the massacre of Ethiopian Christians in Libya has non-

religious perspectives (93.2%) that rather focus on migration, economic strength, and so on (see [Table 3](#) below). Articles that include a religious perspective are found to be very limited in the three newspapers (6.8%). This implies that even though the massacre has a strong religious aspect, it has been downplayed by the three secular newspapers to the point of selectively avoiding the religious element.

TABLE 3 Perspective distribution about the coverage of the massacre of Ethiopians in Libya.

Perspective of the coverage	<i>Addis Admass</i>		<i>Addis Zemen</i>		<i>Reporter</i>		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Religious	1	14.3	1	2.3	3	12.5	5	6.8
Non-religious	6	85.7	42	97.7	21	87.5	69	93.2
Total	7	100	43	100	24	100	74	100

5.5 Power Position: Factors Affecting Framing

The framing process is influenced by the media. Other interest groups can also exert influence on the framing of events that involve religion. In this research work, the government is the major framing power, followed by the media. This finding resonates with [Meseret's \(2013, p. xv\)](#) argument regarding the function of the Ethiopian media since their inception: “portraying the government and/or its leaders as good stewards of national development.”

The EOTC, on the other hand, has the least powerful influence, having no independent voice to be heard in relation to an event that has taken the lives of 30 of its followers in a brutal terrorist attack. Given that the Christian victims belong to the Church and considering the previous

dominant position it once had in the Ethiopian society (Binns, 2017), its role in the framing process is highly limited.

5.5.1 Ethiopian Government

Whether in an appreciative or critical way, most of the coverage in the three newspapers mentions the government. While the state newspaper *Addis Zemen* has articles that favor the government, the two privately owned newspapers are more focused on giving balanced but usually critical reports on the government.

Addis Zemen devotes most of its space to the government. Examining the six articles reporting on the massacre in its May 21 edition (first day of coverage), five of them clearly state the government's understanding of the issue. Three out of the four front page news stories have similar references to the government's stand on the event from different governmental bodies. The first news story is about the condemnation of the massacre by the government and its expression of condolences to the families of the victims. It also refers to the government's plan to have three days of national mourning. The story also emphasizes the government's stance that the massacre will strengthen the government's commitment to combatting terrorism. The second news report is a similar condemnation of the brutality of IS from the ruling EPRDF party. The third front page news report quotes the office of the Ethiopian Foreign Minister and its response to the incident and mentions condolences sent from other governments and international organizations. The editorial also clearly favors the government in stating that the Ethiopian government has had very positive experiences of combatting terrorism and that it calls on African brothers and all peace-loving people around the world to join hands in fighting it together. The feature article also praises the government for effectively preventing planned terrorist plots in Ethiopia. Generally, the first *Addis Zemen* newspaper edition following the news of the massacre of Ethiopian Christians appears to

serve as a mouthpiece function that promotes the government's stand. The remaining articles where the government is mentioned also seem to show similar favoritism. Almost all the news reports, editorials, feature articles, columns, and letters to the editor in *Addis Zemen* are found to be supportive of the government's stance in one way or another.

Addis Zemen also tried to shift public opinion by raising some contentious issues and by magnifying the role of the government in its attempt to tackle socio-political problems. It focuses on the government's effective economic policy, drawing attention to double-digit economic growth. It also hails the government for respecting religious freedom and political rights for Ethiopians and for successfully defending the country against terrorism in Ethiopia and abroad. Much of these arguments are also reflected in the newspaper's editorials.

Much is also written about the government's role in controlling emigration, illegal human trafficking, and domestic terrorist threats – all in relation to the massacre of the Ethiopian Christians. Migration and terrorism are topics in over 24 articles (over one-third of all the coverage) in the three newspapers (14 in *Addis Zemen*, 2 in *Addis Admass*, and 8 in *Reporter*). A letter to the editor published in *Addis Zemen*'s edition of April 24 points out that Ethiopia is growing exponentially, and this growth will help the nation to end emigration and fight terrorism. On the same date, the government is praised in a column for its involvement and achievements in its military intervention to counteract Al-Shabab terrorists in Somalia. The editorials of April 25 and 26 also call on the general Ethiopian public and the country's institutions to stand on the side of the Ethiopian government with the "spirit" of Ethiopianism. However, this is part of a call that is made for unity irrespective of cultural, religious, ethnic, language, gender, and political differences. Ten other articles also mention the achievements and activities of the government in

relation to either terrorism or emigration, or both, and subsequently call on the people to join hands in the struggle to minimize or end them.

Reporter and *Addis Zemen*, on the other hand, report some critical views on the government's "cover-up" of the massacre and its attempt to steer public opinion from the government's failure to address the economic and political demands of the country's youth which eventually led to the emigration that left Ethiopians susceptible to abuse and murder in other countries. The articles written in both newspapers challenge the government's rhetoric about double-digit economic growth, rather mentioning the increasing emigration trend, unemployment, severe inflation, and political pressures, all of which are stated as causes to this emigration.

The two newspapers also underscore that the government is intentionally presenting false information about emigration and terrorism to distract attention, while the reality is that both are reflections of failures of the political and economic policies of the government. Problems not solved by the government are rather suggested by the private media as reasons behind the massacre of the Christians in Libya. The private newspapers blame the government particularly for its failure to deal with illegal migration and human trafficking which are cited as contributing factors for economically staggering, young Ethiopians who are compelled to leave their country in quest of better living conditions. The government's rhetoric that tries to accuse illegal human traffickers is not mentioned as bringing any lasting solution to the emigration problem. It is underlined that these failures should be associated with the severe domestic economic problems and failures of the government to support its citizens wherever they are.

5.5.2 EOTC Leaders

The Addis Zemen and *Reporter* newspapers report on the EOTC Holy Synod's declaration of martyrdom for the victims on their front-page news section. Both newspapers quote the Patriarch

in their reports. The EOTC leaders are otherwise quoted rarely in the three newspapers. Generally, only six articles (5 *Addis Zemen* and 1 *Reporter*) contain statements from Church leaders. Apart from the instance where the patriarch is quoted independently in the articles mentioned above in both newspapers, the only other reference to EOTC leaders is when they are quoted together with the views of other religious leaders. This implies that the EOTC, as an institution, and its leaders have limited framing power in the sample of Ethiopian newspapers.

6 Discussion

This paper uses the case of the massacre of EOTC followers in Libya to showcase the extent to which the religious aspect is presented in the Ethiopian media. Survival theory emphasizes on the magnitude given to value and belief systems in a given context. As a country founded based on ideals of unity to a common goal that is adapted from the teaching of the EOTC, Ethiopia is known for preserving and protecting its values for many centuries. This trend has, however, been challenged since the past century as Ethiopian values are ignored and replaced by alien ideals. Real progress requires return to the emphasis of Ethiopia's traditions and values.

In line with this, the framing of the religious aspect of the massacre of EOTC followers in Libya showcased that the EOTC's religious dimension is ignored in both the state and private media regardless of the case's importance to the life of the Church and of its believers. This ignorance is exemplified by the media's failure to express the identity of the massacred Christians in clear terms. Most of the coverage in the three newspapers prefers to refer to the victims by using a common name that does not reveal their EOTC identity. As the IS video and EOTC response both clearly show, the massacre was religiously motivated. The IS propaganda video makes it clear that the victims were killed for they belong to Ethiopia, which they call is *The Nation of the Cross*, highlighting the religious background of the victims and indicating IS's perception of the Ethiopian

tradition, value, and belief. The EOTC by its Holy Synod gave the title of *Martyrs of the 21st C* to its slaughtered members. The case had the potential to trigger the media to examine about the EOTC's belief, tradition and the nature and implication of the conflict with the IS group, the situation of the victims during the attack and the subsequent actions taken by the EOTC in line with the event.

The Ethiopian newspapers, however, simply avoided that and tried to conceal this aspect by relating it with such issues as illegal migration and human trafficking which relate with the reason of the presence of the victims in Libya, not the reason for their killing. The newspapers rather report that the massacre is a common criminal act aimed at scoring political points. Almost all the coverage sees the event from a non-religious perspective. All in all, this reveals that even though the case has the potential to motivate journalists to report about the EOTC and its ideals in times of such crisis, the media ignored this aspect or shifted the essence of the issue from a religious to a non-religious one. The case proves that the Ethiopian media are far from reporting the values and beliefs that scholars such as Messay and Meskerem identified.

Contrary to the fundamental role of the EOTC and its ideals in the formation of the Ethiopian society and state, the case illustrates that the media in today's Ethiopia ignores very essential aspects of religious life in the EOTC: martyrdom. This is further strengthened by the framing power of the government and the EOTC in the massacre story in the media. While the Ethiopian government secures strong framing power across the three newspapers, the EOTC as an institution appears to be almost inexistent. Nonetheless, the nature of the reports is different in the state and private media. While the state newspaper, *Addis Zemen*, seems to serve as an agent for the government in some disputed instances, the two privately owned newspapers tend to present balanced reports while also criticizing the government in some instances where it has deliberately

tried to influence public opinion and cover up criticism. It is surprising that the EOTC secures a very limited voice in an event that takes the life of its 30 followers in a brutal way.

This disregard for the religious aspect in the framing of the event is partly related to Ethiopian journalists' perceiving secularism to mean writing articles and news reports that are free of religion ([Sileshie, 2018](#)), and partly related to the Church having lost its dominant position as an integral part of the nation due to the efforts of the governments after the 1970s which promote anti-EOTC rhetoric ([Abbink, 2003](#); Binns, 2017, p. 230). The third reason can be the EOTC's inability to reach out to the public due to its weakened position.

Generally, by ignoring religion in their reports, the secular media in Ethiopia affect the survival of Ethiopian tradition negatively and thereby hamper its development and modernization.

7 Conclusion

Even though some scholars demand a return to the religious past to assure genuine societal progress in Ethiopia, this case study reveals that the mass media appear to be working opposite to this idea. The framing of the terror attack against 30 Ethiopian Christians in Libya by the three selected secular newspapers shows that the religious aspect has been ignored. A focus on the Orthodox Christian identity of the victims and on the religious justification for the massacre are not present in the newspaper articles. The coverage of the massacre is rather seen from a non-religious perspective whereby the event is presented as a common criminal offence intended to achieve mere political ambitions.

In the framing, while the government is found to be the major framing power that creates and shifts opinions across the newspapers, the EOTC is found to have limited framing potential. This tells us that the call of [Messay \(1999\)](#) to preserve the Ethiopian religious tradition to support Ethiopia's real development is just a far-fetched dream – at least from the perspective of the public

sphere. Much more work is required to resolve the tension that exists in the perception journalists have when it comes to maintaining religious belief and values in the media, exercising secularism, and rectifying the hostile approach of governments towards the EOTC. The EOTC is also expected to be an efficient communicator in the existing media dynamics that disregard its values.

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