



CONTENDING RELIGIONS, IDENTITIES AND SPACE

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PAPER PROPOSAL

AUTHOR NAME UOLDELUL CHELATI DIRAR

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION: UNIVERSITY OF MACERATA

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ABSTRACT:

Independent Eritrea emerged in 1993 as the result of a protracted liberation struggle that lasted for more than three decades. One of the major linchpins of this long and bloody struggle has been the strong assertion of secularism. Within the dominant Marxist-Leninist ideological framework of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (the guerilla movement that led Eritrea to independence) secularism was portrayed as the only viable solution for independent Eritrea due to its complex religious landscape.

After the achievement of Independence the newborn State of Eritrea enforced this strong secularist approach by declaring that the state should have been "secular, separate from religion, yet respectful of the equality of religions". Yet, twenty years after the achievement of its independence, the State of Eritrea has developed a rather ambiguous and highly controversial approach toward religion and its status and role in the Eritrean society. This attitude, besides, arousing strong complaints for international human rights bodies, has also significantly contributed in redefining the relationship between the Eritrean state and its citizens. Allegedly religious intolerance has been adduced as one of the reasons for the massive exodus of many Eritrean citizens that has filled the media in the last decade.

Therefore, starting from this complex and often ideologically marked context, aim of this paper is to fathom some of the ambiguities and contradictions which shape the official policies of the Eritrean government toward religion. In particular, I will explore the gap between the official declaration of respect for religious freedom and the multifarious nuances through which religions are practically muzzled and denied of any political visibility, in spite of their being deeply rooted in people's culture and identities.

AUTHOR'S SHORT BIO AND ACADEMIC PROFILE :

Uoldelul Chelati Dirar was born in Asmara (Eritrea). He has completed his secondary school and university studies in Italy. In 1998, after having earned a Doctorate in African history at the University of Cagliari, he went back to Eritrea where he has taught until 2003 in the Department of History of the University of Asmara. He has also been chair of the same Department from 1998 to 2002. In 2003 Uoldelul Chelati Dirar went back to Italy and is now Associate Professor of African History in the Department of Political Science, Communication and International Relations at the University of Macerata. For the period 2010 - 2013 he has been appointed Director of the Centre for International Relations of the University of Macerata. From January 2013 to 2016 he has been appointed Delegate of the Rector for International Relations, internationalisation of teaching activities and mobility. Historian by training, Uoldelul Chelati Dirar has dealt mainly with the history of the Horn of Africa, particularly Eritrea, during colonial times. His research interests focus on the processes of elites formation and on the development of nationalisms in the Horn of Africa.