

HOSANNA: FROM GARRISON TOWN TO REMITTANCE-ANIMATED REGIONAL HUB

Dereje Feyissa and Fana Gebresenbet, with Abreham Abebe



Janaury 2025



Rift Valley Institute
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK



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ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

This report was written for the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF) and is part of its Knowledge for Peace (K4P) series on contested urban spaces. The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict-sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and funded by the UK government.

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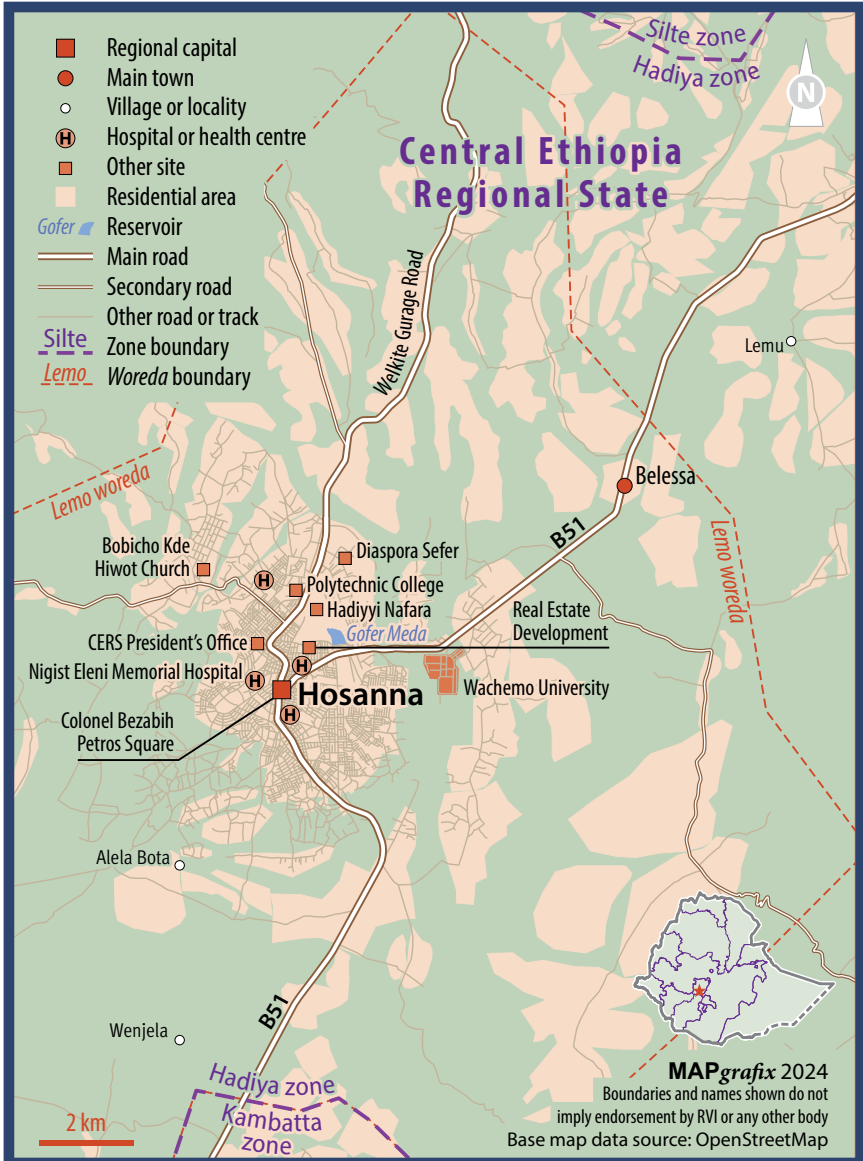
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MAP



SUMMARY

- This report offers a case study of the contestation for ownership and control of key urban resources in Hosanna, located in the Hadiya zone of the newly formed Central Ethiopia Regional State (CERS).
- It examines the urbanization processes and the shifts in social and economic power from previously dominant groups to formerly marginalized local populations, with the migration of ethnic Hadiya to South Africa playing a crucial role in these recent transformations.
- In Hosanna, the primary sources of contestation are intra-ethnic (within the Hadiya community) and inter-religious. Although these disputes can be serious, they are generally non-violent. This stands in contrast to other regions, where contested urban spaces have experienced more serious unrest.

The study identifies four interrelated forms of contestation linked to urbanization in Hosanna:

1. **GENTRIFICATION TENSIONS:** This involves new Hadiya economic elites, primarily those who have benefited from international migration, acquiring urban housing plots in central Hosanna from non-Hadiya. In a reversal of historical trends, the sellers relocate to the city's periphery.
2. **LAND CONFLICTS IN PERI-URBAN AREAS:** The constitution reserves land ownership for the state and the peoples of Ethiopia, granting individuals only usufruct rights. Rapid urbanization has often disadvantaged peri-urban communities, forcing families into informal settlements. In the areas surrounding Hosanna, the economic gains from migration have led to intra-ethnic disputes between the Lemo and Soro clans of the Hadiya. Significant rural-to-urban migration has intensified peri-urbanization, with Lemo farmers facing pressure—whether through enticement or coercion—to sell their land in informal transactions. This trend is impoverishing these farmers and fuelling tensions with their Soro clan counterparts in Hosanna. Urban growth strategies in Ethiopia typically rely on the government's compulsory acquisition of peri-urban land, evicting farmers and other property owners for the sake of development. However, on Hosanna's fringes, significant expropriation has not occurred. Instead, an informal land market thrives, with Hadiya farmers selling land to speculators, often returned migrants from South Africa. This has resulted in rapid, unplanned expansion into neighbouring Lemo woreda and long-term dispossession of farmers, as transactions tend to be unequal.

- 3. PUBLIC SPACE AND CULTURAL CONTESTATION:** The clash of revived Hadiya cultural practices with Protestant and Orthodox Christian traditions has intensified competition over public spaces in Hosanna. The neo-traditional revival, which serves as a major platform for Hadiya nationalism, has led to fierce struggles, particularly over the reclaiming of Gofer Meda—renamed Hadiyy Nafara (meaning ‘the lung of Hadiya’). This dispute has sometimes escalated into violence.
- 4. REGIONAL CAPITAL DISPUTE:** The contest over the location of the capital of Central Ethiopia Regional State (CERS) involves rivalry between the Hadiya and Gurage. The current multi-city approach designates Hosanna as the seat of the regional state presidency and Welkite as the seat of the regional council. The Hadiya’s claim to Hosanna as the regional capital has sparked new political aspirations, including the Greater Hadiya project. This aims to reclaim lost territories and revive historical alliances from the era of the Hadiya Sultanate, positioning the Hadiya in direct conflict with Gurage nationalists over regional boundaries.



INTRODUCTION

Situated 230 km south of Addis Ababa, Hosanna, the capital of Hadiya zone, is one of the largest urban areas in southern Ethiopia. Hosanna had an estimated population of 13,467 in 1984; 31,701 in 1994; 69,997 in 2007 and 180,000 in 2021.¹

According to the latest census in 2007, 90 per cent of Hadiya zone's 1,231,196 inhabitants were Hadiya, followed by the Kembatta, Gurage, Silte and Amhara. In terms of religion, around three-quarters are Protestant with 11.1 per cent Muslims and 8.4 per cent Orthodox Christians.²

Hosanna is by far the largest urban area in Hadiya zone. Its dynamism is evident in the proliferation of multi-storey buildings and upscale neighbourhoods, along with myriad state and private bank branches. Testimony to the status of Hosanna as a financial hub, both the state-owned Commercial Bank of Ethiopia and the privately owned Nib Bank have opened district offices in Hosanna.³ Banks seek to tap into the city's high deposits, reportedly Ethiopia's third largest after Addis Ababa and Gondar.⁴ This boom reflects the fact that commerce and property in Hosanna is now largely controlled by Hadiya international migrants and their families. Although Hosanna has largely missed out on state-funded mega projects, the private sector is thriving, especially Hadiya-owned businesses.

HOSANNA: A BRIEF HISTORY OF URBANIZATION

Interaction between the Hadiya and the northern Christian empire dates back to the medieval period, although Hadiya was incorporated into the modern Ethiopian state as part of the territorial expansions undertaken by Emperor Menelik II at the end of the nineteenth century. Urbanization among the Hadiya and the emergence of Hosanna as a city is related to this development.

Established in 1910, Hosanna was one of the first towns to spring up following the late 19th

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- 1 Censuses of 1984; 1994; 2007 and population projection of 2021, <https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Population-of-Towns-as-of-July-2021.pdf>.
 - 2 CSA, 'The 2007 Census Result, SNNPR, Hadiya Zone', 2008.
 - 3 Commercial banks' structures do not necessarily follow the administrative map. They establish districts and district headquarters based on number of branches, volume of savings and revenue they get and geographical proximity of their branches. Before opening their district headquarters in Hosanna, CBE had its district headquarters in Wolaita Sodo and Nib in Butajira.
 - 4 Interview with a senior bank official, Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, Hosanna, 10 December 2023.

century southern conquests of imperial Ethiopia. This ushered in radical socio-economic and political transformation.⁵ Typical of urbanization in the southern periphery, Hosanna evolved out of a military garrison. As imperial Ethiopia grew, garrisons (*'ketema'* in Amharic) were set up all over the newly acquired territories to subdue the people. To maintain the army, part of the conquered land—and even the conquered people themselves, working as *gabars* ('tribute givers')—was allocated to provide for the new northern politico-military elite. As one commentator notes:

As the country expanded geographically, garrisons were set up all over newly acquired territories to hold down the conquered people ... This policy contributed significantly not only to the social mobility of the military elite but to the growth and functional transformation of the garrisons as well. Many of the garrisons were relatively small; nonetheless, they performed a primary service in the urbanization movement of the period.⁶

A more recent development closely tied to growing urbanization and contestations in Hosanna is Hadiya migration to South Africa.⁷ Among other economic, religious and cultural factors, this is driven by the historical inequality between Ethiopia's northern core and the peripheral south, including the Hadiya area. This inequality emerged during state formation and remains evident in political representation and national wealth distribution. For example, despite promises made by the 1974 revolution to redress ethnic inequalities and foster greater political inclusion, the Hadiya continued to be marginalized throughout the years of Derg military rule (1974–1991).⁸ Likewise, the ethno-federalism of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF; 1991–2019) did not deliver on socio-economic transformation for the Hadiya and others parts of southern Ethiopia. Rather, resistance by the Hadiya National Democratic Organization (HNDO) resulted in the EPRDF government persecuting its supporters (and the Hadiya in general), especially in the early 2000s.⁹ The political and economic conditions under both the Derg and the EPRDF triggered Hadiya migration to South Africa.

Starting in the early 2010s, Hadiya migration to South Africa began to play an increasingly

5 Donald L Donham and Wendy James, eds., *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

6 Akalou Wolde-Michael, 'Urban Development in Ethiopia (1889-1925) Early Phase', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 11/1 (1973), 1.

7 As one of the strongest economies on the continent, South Africa is a major destination for African migrants. At least until 2011, a relatively liberal post-Apartheid immigration policy enabled migration to South Africa. Ethiopian reforms in 1991 protected free movement rights, including removing the need for Ethiopians to obtain an exit visa.

8 Dereje Feyissa, 'Beyond Economics: The Role of Socio-political Factors in Hadiya Migration to South Africa', *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies* 5-1/2 (2022): 35–58.

9 Kjetil Tronvoll, 'Voting Violence and Violations: Peasant Voices on the Flawed Elections in Hadiya, Southern Ethiopia', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 39/4 (December 2001): 697–716.

prominent role in the contestations linked to Hosanna's urbanization. This was largely due to the transformational impact of money earned abroad. In particular, it spurred massive rural-to-urban Hadiya migration, which more than doubled Hosanna's population. This created higher demand for land and housing, along with social services. The increased flow of resources turned the town into a remittance-activated economic hub.

Religious competition and conflict over public space in Hosanna has become an especially visible form of contestation. Hadiya are primarily Protestant, while non-Hadiya tend to be Orthodox Christians. As Hadiya benefitted from migration, their leverage over non-Hadiya Orthodox Christians increased, which can be seen in changing urban demographics and increasing peri-urbanization. Reflecting broader patterns in Ethiopia, fast-tracked urbanization in Hosanna is not caused by the pull effect of industrial jobs, but a more general perception among rural dwellers that life is better in the city.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

This case study of Hosanna is part of a larger research project on contested spaces in Ethiopia, with a focus on urbanization processes and their links to conflict. The general objective of the Hosanna study is to identify and analyse the terms of urban contestation, where contestation occurs and who the key actors are. In contrast to the more violent competition occurring elsewhere in the country (notably in several other southern towns and in multiple urban areas in Oromia), Hosanna is an outlier as the process tends to be peaceful. Examining peaceful contestation offers insight into the conditions that indicate whether contestation for an urban space will be violent or not.

More broadly, the Hosanna study aims to shed light on the limits of cities and towns as objects of struggle. Urbanization in Ethiopia is not primarily spurred by industrialization but by rural-to-urban migration and the emerging conception of urban space as constituting the new good life. The latter is partly informed by access to social services and other amenities, which are concentrated in urban areas. The focus on urban areas simultaneously reinforces existing patterns of enclave development that deflect investment from other priority areas. Because Ethiopia is still largely rural, genuine socio-economic transformation will ultimately be rooted more in agrarian reform rather than in contests over towns and cities, even if they are growing rapidly.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses various qualitative research methods. First, it is informed by a comprehensive literature review, including of academic publications and grey literature. Second, the study is based on primary data collection during two weeks of fieldwork in Hosanna.¹⁰ This includes

10 In particular, the study used a snowball sampling method, whereby research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential participants.

key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and policy document reviews. A total of 50 people (35 men and 15 women) participated, representing various population groups resident in Hosanna town and Hadiya zone. Third, the study draws on both the long-term research experience of the team members among the Hadiya and well-established social and political networks.¹¹ This enhanced access to study participants, enabled the collection of relevant data and facilitated the management of political sensitivities. The study was primarily conducted in Amharic, which all the informants were fluent in. Co-author Abreham Abebe is native to the study area and that eased translation of Hadiyyissa words that required local knowledge.

11 This is in the context of a five-year research project the authors were involved in between late 2019 and early 2024. See for details, Migration for Development and Equality (MIDEQ) Hub. Accessed 16 December 2024, <https://www.mideq.org/en/>.



GENTRIFICATION IN AN OLD GARRISON TOWN CENTRE

Hosanna shares the traits of southern Ethiopian cities and garrison towns, starting with how it was renamed. Ras Abate Buayalew, the best-known imperial ruler of Hosanna and a key figure in the Adwa Victory of 1896, changed the town name from Wachemo to Hosanna in 1910.¹² As with most other southern towns—Debre Zeit, Nazareth and Yirgalem, for example—the name chosen by an imperial ruler imposed the religious or cultural norms of the dominant group. Hosanna is the name the Ethiopian Orthodox Church uses for Palm Sunday (symbolizing Christ’s triumphal entry to Jerusalem). Ras Abate chose this new name for the garrison town because his military company arrived there on that day.¹³

The cultural imposition went further than a simple name change, however. The Amharas who accompanied Ras Abate’s contingent brought their relatives to live in the town, eventually populating the centre of what developed into Hosanna.¹⁴ In addition to having large areas of land, the newcomers established churches. Typical of power dynamics in garrison settlements elsewhere, local Hadiya were excluded from the town centre based on cultural and religious discrimination. For example, the new arrivals called the Hadiya ‘*Gudela*’, a pejorative that means ‘uncultured people without religion’.

Hosanna therefore served as a location of dispossession, extraction and exploitation of the Hadiya. The administrators of the Hadiya and Kambatta area were based in Hosanna, particularly those who collected taxes. One study participant explains:

Hadiya people were Muslim and followers of a traditional belief, and the owners of

12 In the recently inaugurated Adwa Victory Memorial, Ras Abate Buayalew Negus (Aba Yefres) is among the 12 generals recognized as playing a crucial role during Adwa. The Battle of Adwa was the decisive victory that thwarted Italian expansion of its colonial empire in the Horn of Africa during the First Italo–Ethiopian War (1895–1896). Adwa consequently became a symbol of pan-Africanism and secured Ethiopian sovereignty until the Second Italo–Ethiopian War 40 years later (1935–1937).

13 Perhaps this choice also symbolizes his role as a conquistador.

14 The term ‘Amhara’ is used here to refer to people who accompanied Ras Abate and other governors associated with imperial rule in Hadiya. They were rewarded with land for the services they provided. These people may not necessarily have been Amhara according to the contemporary categorization, but they spoke Amharic and practiced Orthodox Christianity, which served as markers of being Amhara. The use of ‘Amhara’ to indicate ruling class and close affinity with the state is, however, not very common among the Hadiya.

the area [now Hosanna] were also Muslim Hadiya. We know the history of Hosanna [Wachemo] before Ras Abate came to Hadiya. But since Ras Abate Buayalew's rule, the town has been in the hands of Orthodox and Amhara landowners and has been reshaped into a modern town. During the reign of the Amhara emperors, Ras Abate Buayalew, who was the main leader of the network established for the people of Hadiya to pay taxes to the Amhara, converted the former name of the town Wachemo to Hosanna. The name was highly attached to Christianity and the town was considered a religious place. This concept hindered non-Orthodox people from entering the town. At that time, Hosanna was the seat for all Amhara landowners who owned vast lands in all the villages of present-day Hadiya zone and its neighbours. Those de facto owners of the land collected taxes from Hadiya peasants. Hadiya farmers also provided goats, sheep, teff and honey.¹⁵

The Hadiya thus had numerous grievances to settle against the Amhara landowners during the land reform period initiated in 1975 by the Derg.¹⁶ Whereas violence broke out in other parts of southern Ethiopia (such as in neighbouring Gedeo and Wolayta), among the Hadiya the transition was comparatively peaceful. In part, this is due to Amhara landowners anticipating the risk of violence that the fundamental changes the 1974 revolution would bring. To mitigate this risk and protect their safety and property, the Amhara used strategic marriages with respected Hadiya personalities:

When the Derg regime came to power, Amhara landowners were the first targets. Following the declaration of 'Land to the Tiller', some Hadiya were resentful and showed interest in recapturing the [land] resources of their predecessors. Because of this, landowners were forced to form marriage relationships with prominent Hadiya traditional authorities to save their property from looting. Landowners immediately started marrying their children with Garads [Hadiya traditional authorities], as these families were able to save their property. Since then, the conflict between the Hadiya and the Amhara has been resolved.¹⁷

This intermarriage strategy worked so well for the Amhara that the Hadiya remained a minority in Hosanna and there was no significant violent dispossession. It was most successful for the Amhara with respect to the ownership of housing in Hosanna town. For most of the twentieth century, many Hadiya appear to have been less interested in the urban economy, leaving core parts of the town to others.¹⁸ Besides, the revolutionary violence under the Derg by Petros Gebre, a Kembatta administrator of the Hadiya and Kembatta province, discouraged Hadiya from living

15 Interview with Gash Bishawu, resident of Hosanna, Hosanna, 5 December 2023.

16 This should not necessarily denote ethnic identity as 'Amhara' does in current political parlance. Rather, it primarily reveals power dynamics, the representation of the state and an Amharic-speaking group that practices Orthodox Christianity.

17 Interview with Gash Bishawu, resident of Hosanna, Hosanna, 5 December 2023.

18 Interview with Haji Amelda, resident of Hosanna, Hosanna, 5 December 2023.

in Hosanna.¹⁹ Throughout the Derg period, elites from neighbouring Kambatta were dominant in the newly constituted Hadiya–Kambatta *awraja* (administrative district). Consequently, the Hadiya were preoccupied with fighting against injustice and for political recognition, with economic concerns of less importance. An elderly Hosanna resident elaborates:

Unfortunately, the Derg regime was not good for the Hadiya people. The Derg appointed Petros Gebre, Kambatta’s cruel leader, over Hadiya, who perpetrated heinous crimes against Hadiya youths and elites. Following this, Hadiya was in a struggle for identity in Hosanna town and other areas. As a result, the Hadiya were not focused on the economic struggle during the Derg regime ... The Hadiya situation didn’t improve under the EPRDF, as the opposition movement then took root in the zone. The abuse of Hadiya continued. The Hadiya were forced to leave their homeland and numerous young people, including many soldiers from the Derg regime, migrated. Due to political instability and other economic factors, the people of Hadiya migrated to Kenya and later moved to South Africa.²⁰

This indicates that the Hadiya did not significantly benefit from improved freedoms and equality under either the Derg or the EPRDF. Two factors explain how non-Hadiya actors were able to maintain their economic advantage in Hosanna.²¹ First, the initial strategic intermarriages, combined with the threat of the Red Terror in Hosanna, were crucial in discouraging urbanization among the Hadiya during the Derg period.²² Second, under the EPRDF, the success of the opposition Hadiya National Democratic Organization (HNDO) in the 2000 regional and parliamentary elections (after boycotting all local and national elections since 1992) resulted in violent suppression by the authorities, which helped consolidate the economic position of non-Hadiya.²³ Sustained political discussions after the 2005 elections and positive moves by the federal government (notably, establishing Wachemo University, providing potable water for the town and upgrading the hospital) smoothed relations between the Hadiya and the EPRDF. In terms of emerging Hadiya dominance of central Hosanna, sizeable remittances from South Africa have played the most significant role. The Hadiya constitute the largest community

19 Petros Gebre was later tried and sentenced by the special prosecutor for crimes committed during the Red Terror. For example, see: Kjetil Tronvoll, Charles Schaefer & Girmachew Alemu Aneme, eds., *The Ethiopian Red Terror Trials: Transitional Justice Challenged*, Boydell & Brewer, 2009.


20 Interview with Gash Bishawu, resident of Hosanna, Hosanna, 5 December 2023.

21 See: Tronvoll, ‘Voting Violence’.

22 The Red Terror was period of extreme political violence in revolutionary Ethiopia in the late 1970s, with much of it carried out by state security agents in major urban centres.

23 The HNDO is associated with the late Beyene Petros, a professor at Addis Ababa University and key national opposition political figure between 1991 and 2018. He is the brother of Colonel Bezabeh Petros, a fighter jet pilot who trained and served during the Derg regime but was decommissioned during the 1990s. Colonel Petros was later invited back when Eritrea invaded Ethiopia in 1998. Captured after a crash landing in Eritrea, he is presumed dead in an Eritrean prison. A central Hosanna square, including a monument, is now named after him. Interview with a former member of HNDO, Hosanna, 26 May 2023.

among Ethiopian migrants in South Africa.²⁴ While successful migrants have invested in land and housing in Hosanna, they have also animated a large rural-to-urban Hadiya migration. In turn, this stimulated local trade. A resident of Hosanna explains:



Hosanna's economic landscape began to transform significantly with the migration of Hadiya people to South Africa. Prior to this shift, non-Hadiyas dominated most sectors in Hosanna, particularly the economic ones, making it challenging for Hadiya merchants to compete. The land and trade sectors were largely controlled by Amhara and merchants from the Gurage and Silte communities, while Hadiya presence was limited to lower-income civil service roles, such as teaching and other government positions. The migration to South Africa marked a turning point for Hadiya society. Remittances from South Africa began to flow into the Hadiya community, bringing substantial benefits. This influx of funds catalysed a significant shift in economic dominance within Hosanna, allowing Hadiya individuals to enter commerce, purchase property from former feudal landowners, and gain control over various town activities. The economic resurgence in Hosanna can be attributed largely to the migration of Hadiya to South Africa. The remittances played a crucial role in shifting economic power from non-Hadiyas to Hadiyas, effectively empowering them to reshape the town's economic landscape and achieve a newfound sense of ownership and influence.²⁵

It is only since the early 2000s, with the increased importance of migration to South Africa, that contestations over urban issues began in earnest for the Hadiya. In addition to the remittances, the acquisition of business skills has been instrumental. Hadiya migrants in South Africa engage in activities ranging from informal street vending to wholesale trading and owning commercial buildings, especially in Johannesburg. The growing flow of money from South Africa has created a spree of conspicuous consumption by Hadiya. Significant sums have been deposited in local banks and then invested in a booming Hosanna property market.

The most contested spaces in Hosanna are the oldest parts, settled by non-Hadiya residents during the town's first decades. These are the most sought-after locations for the new Hadiya economic elite to construct residential and commercial property, including hotels, banks and cafes. As the value of land in Hosanna increases about 20 per cent per annum, those with money rush to buy it, while those (mostly non-Hadiya) who have land informally sell it to acquire capital that they invest in starting a business or buying property outside the town centre.

24 Dereje Feyissa, Meron Zeleke and Fana Gebresenbet, 'Migration as a collective project in the Global South – a case study from the Ethiopia-South Africa Corridor', in *The Palgrave Handbook on South-South Migration and Inequality*, eds. Heaven Crawley and Joseph Kofi Teye, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024.

25 Interview with Haji Amelda, resident of Hosanna, Hosanna, 5 December 2023.



Image to the left: An upmarket house in Hosanna built using remittances. Image to the right: A new hotel in Hosanna built using remittances. Photos taken by the research team in December 2023.

The primary actors involved in competition for land and urban space include the Hadiya diaspora in South Africa, Hadiya business people (who benefit from the bustling remittance-activated trade), brokers (mainly Hadiya men) and non-Hadiya occupiers of plots in central Hosanna. Rather than stemming from a political campaign, Hosanna's gentrification is driven by increased demand due to the capital accumulated from abroad. As local politicians and administrators endorse rather than propel the process, tensions, and so the risk of violent conflict, are diminished.

All the study participants see the gentrification process as win-win: Whereas the non-Hadiya avoided being victims of political violence, Hadiya economic power has increased as a result of migration to South Africa. This Hosanna resident elaborates:

In Hosanna, the dynamic shift in property ownership has led former central residents, predominantly non-Hadiya, to sell their houses and land to the Hadiya diaspora. These transactions are voluntary, with sellers receiving fair compensation for their properties. It's important to note that when they first arrived in Hosanna from Menz, they came with nothing and built their wealth through activities such as collecting taxes and developing land. In contrast to the newcomers, who acquired land and built homes without purchasing them, the current economic scenario has reversed. Formerly affluent non-Hadiya families are now facing economic difficulties, while previously less wealthy Hadiya families, bolstered by remittances from South Africa, have become economically empowered.

As a result, many of these non-Hadiya families, unable to maintain their previous standard of living or afford similar quality housing in the town centre, are seeking better opportunities. The practical solution for them has been to sell their properties at high prices, relocate to the outskirts of Hosanna, and invest in building new homes. This trend reflects the ongoing

transformation of Hosanna's economic and social landscape.²⁶

Hence, gentrification in Hosanna is driven by the remittances of the Hadiya diaspora and by local Hadiya business people who take over plots from non-Hadiya residents. Given the high price of central real estate, the latter can use sale proceeds both to construct a new residence on the periphery of Hosanna and to develop a small business. These businesses are often transport related and entail buying a *Bajaj* motor trike for a relative. That non-Hadiya residents remain around the town rather than relocate elsewhere is further evidence that the transactions are peaceful. The overall trend marks a reversal of previous ethnic imbalances and exclusions in a process that can be termed the 'Hadiyaization' of Hosanna's socio-economic and cultural landscape. If there is a loser, it is peri-urban Hadiya farmers.



26 Interview with Sintayehu Erango, resident of Hosanna, Hosanna, 3 January 2024.

CONTESTED PROCESSES: PERI-URBANIZATION AND CLAN REPRESENTATION

In addition to the movement of non-Hadiya from central Hosanna to peri-urban areas, the large flow of remittances has enabled increasing rural-to-urban Hadiya migration within the zone. With returns diminishing in the previously preferred investment area of long-distance public transportation, many of the diaspora have increasingly switched to property. Especially since 2010, due to increasing demand, the value of central Hosanna plots grew rapidly, in turn triggering more migrants to invest their earnings in real estate.

Table 1 illustrates the dramatic expansion of Hosanna's built-up area over recent decades. It grew from 321 hectares in 1990 to 5,068 hectares in 2020, a nearly 15-fold increase. The most significant growth occurred between 2014 and 2020 when the developed area surged by 2,818 hectares from a base of 2,250 hectares in 2014, a 125 per cent increase. This period saw an average annual expansion of approximately 470 hectares, reflecting a 1.5-fold increase in the town's built-up area compared to 1990. Throughout the entire 30-year span, the average annual growth rate was 158.2 hectares, roughly half the total built-up area of Hosanna in 1990. These figures underscore an unprecedented level of horizontal expansion that was particularly pronounced after 2014.

Table 1. Change in the built-up area in and around Hosanna since the 1990s

YEAR	AREA (HA)	YEAR INTERVAL	INCREASE (HA)	INCREASE %	INCREASE 1990-2020	AVE ANNUAL INCREASE (HA)	ANNUAL INCREASE (%)
1990	321						
2002	861	12	540	168.22			
2014	2,250	12	1,389	161.32			
2020	5,068	6	2,818	125.24	4,747	158.23	49.29

Source: Based on publicly available aerial photographs (credit to Zeleke Kebebew, GIS Specialist)

The geographic expansion of Hosanna has come at the expense of the surrounding peri-urban farmers, who are mostly Hadiya. This has brought to the fore historical tensions between two Hadiya clans: the Soro and the Lemo. It has also elicited resistance from the farmers. While Hosanna is multi-clan, including the Soro and Lemo, and multi-ethnic, the surrounding Lemo

woreda, where peri-urbanization is occurring, is inhabited by the Lemo clan. Peri-urban land in Lemo woreda is classified as rural agricultural land and it is not legal for farmers to sell their land for others to build property on it.

Successful investment requires reliable information from the zonal administration to avoid plots reserved for public infrastructure and services. In practice, this means local politicians and administrators leaking information on land-use plans and facilitating or guaranteeing the re-classification of rural land into urban land. These actors at the zonal and town administration work with brokers, successful returned migrants and business people. Officials sometimes even disseminate rumours that agricultural land will be absorbed into the town administrative area, thereby convincing farmers to sell rather than risk government expropriation for compensation well below the rates offered by informal buyers.

Although the constitution bars land sales, these illegal peri-urban land exchanges²⁷ are common in Hadiya and elsewhere in the country.²⁸ While the law recognizes farmers as the owners of the houses built upon the land they farm, woreda officials turn a blind eye to this when the land is sold. Elders play a key role, utilizing a traditional oath system of ‘swearing on paper’ (known as *Hidrow*)²⁹ which binds the seller to respect the deal. Along with everyone else in Lemo woreda, the district’s administrators are generally aware of these dealings. The government has, however, not taken steps to try and prevent them. As the president of Hadiya zone (and former head of Lemo woreda) explains:

The zone faces significant challenges in addressing land grabbing in Lemo. Officials are fully aware of these activities, but current regulations complicate efforts to halt them. The Rural Land Users’ Rights Certification Proclamation permits farmers to use and build on their land but prohibits the sale of it. This creates a legal grey area that allows for informal, underground land transactions. Farmers can construct up to 17 houses on a single hectare of land if they choose. Although they are allowed to build, the regulations are not specific about land transactions, leading to informal arrangements. Since rural land does not require a construction permit and land

27 Article 40 of the FDRE Constitution categorizes land as exclusively owned by the state and peoples of Ethiopia, and prohibits land sales and any form of exchange. However, the constitution also holds that individuals can lease land and own property built on it. Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, ‘Proclamation of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia’. Addis Ababa: Federal Negarit Gazeta, 21 August 1995.

28 Similar forms of semi-formalized land transactions occur elsewhere in Ethiopia. See for example, Wolelaw Getahun Derso and Brightman Gebremichael. ‘The Leasehold System and Drivers of Informal Land Transactions in Bahir Dar City, Ethiopia’. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 16/3 (2022): 415–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2022.2164428>.

29 This is a corrupt use of the traditional oath system (*hidrow*) designed to coerce farmers to honour the land deals they make, despite the lack of legality. Alongside this, there are cases of farmers going back to the new landowners to demand more money when they face hardship or selling their plots to multiple buyers over time.

transactions are not processed through legal channels, deals are often made informally with the involvement of local elders. In practice, buyers—often land brokers or migrants—may falsely claim ownership [though legitimately according to the informal deals] by constructing houses, while official ownership remains with the farmers. Farmers rarely admit to selling their land, and even when they do, they may regret the decision or hope to reclaim it. Many simply lie about the ownership of the houses to avoid complications. The lack of legal recourse for the government makes it difficult to address these issues effectively. A potential solution is to develop peri-urban areas into properly governed towns, which could improve oversight and management of land use and transactions.³⁰

There are cases of male youth pressurizing parents into cashing in on their land to finance their migration to South Africa or for female youth to go to the Gulf.³¹ Prospective migrants also pressure their parents to buy a motorbike so they can earn enough to pay for the migration. Referring to the ubiquity of this brand of Chinese motorbike, a popular saying in Hosanna is that the Boxer motorbike now has a similar status to a domestic animal—something that all Hadiya families need to have. Given the rising costs of migration, brokers also agitate for informal land sales. A concomitant increase in the risk of travelling to South Africa is, however, making this a path to destitution for many.³²

In contrast, some Hadiya, especially returnee migrants, have profited from purchasing farmers' land and building property on it. These unequal transactions can be seen as what a Marxist academic has called 'accumulation by dispossession'.³³ According to this theory, the potential for violent confrontation between farmers and speculators is high—and indeed there are

30 Interview with Abraham Mecha, former head of Lemo woreda who later became president of Hadiya zone administration, Hosanna, 15 August 2021.

31 International migration among the Hadiya is gendered. Women migrate to the Gulf States and men to South Africa. In recent years, nuptial migration of future wives to South Africa under the sponsorship of former migrants has been increasing; see: Estifanos Yordanos and Laura Freeman, 'Shifts in the Trend and Nature of Migration in the Ethiopia-South Africa Migration Corridor', *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies*, 5/1-2 (2022). When it comes to land markets, however, migration to South Africa is a more consequential factor.

32 Focus group discussion with returnee migrants from migrant detention centres in Tanzania, Hosanna, September 2023. Also see Isaac Kaledzi, Antonio Cascais, Hirut Melesse, Kathy Short, 'Peril on the migrant route in southern Africa', *Deutsche Welle*, 13 December 2022. Accessed 16 December 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/peril-on-the-migrant-route-in-southern-africa/a-64077749>.

33 This concept was developed by David Harvey, a Marxist geographer. It defines neoliberal capitalist policies resulting in a centralization of wealth and power in the hands of a few by dispossessing both public and private entities of their wealth or land. David Harvey, 'The "New" Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession', *Socialist Register* 40 (2004): 63–87. Accessed 18 July 2024, <https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5811/2707>.

already examples of farmers forcefully reclaiming land allegedly sold under duress.³⁴

Despite these simmering problems, international migration has nonetheless become a major future-making project for Hadiya. While Hadiya from all over the zone migrate to South Africa, they primarily invest their earnings in land in and around Hosanna, rather than in their home towns. Interest in Hosanna's peri-urban areas is therefore mounting, and it is often accompanied by the desire of farmers to use the proceeds from the transactions to pay for a relatives' migration.

These economic actors—including households disposing of land, brokers and diaspora buyers—need the support of local politicians, who offer it in return for generous commissions. These connections are so strong and profitable that—unlike other ethnic communities in Ethiopia—Hadiya politicians often want to remain at key positions in the town and zonal administrations, rather than move to the regional or federal level.

Hadiya political and institutional actors are generally not, however, aligned with either the interests of the farmers nor those of their own clan. This creates friction, with contestations primarily occurring among the Hadiya political elite, with the economic elite (often returnee migrants) also sometimes involved. This has implications for the quality of governance at the zonal level, as authorities prioritize land deals with speculators over genuine investors. The latter struggle to secure land for their enterprises and the required investment licences.

At the root of these contestations is the location of Hosanna on traditional Lemo territory and surrounded by two Lemo-majority woredas: Lemo and An-Lemo. The expansion to peri-urban areas is not only conceptualized by Lemo cultural nationalists as dispossessing the farmers who live and work there but also as taking over Lemo territory. This situation can be compared to the disputes between Addis Ababa City Administration and the Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfinne that sparked the Oromo protests from 2014-2018. In that instance, any planned expansion of Addis Ababa's administrative boundaries was opposed by many Oromia officials and activists. So far, the expansion of Hosanna has consumed almost half of the *kebeles* (lowest administrative division) from the surrounding two Lemo woredas, eliciting opposition there. Moreover, Hosanna serves as the administrative seat of the zone, town and Lemo woreda. Since late 2023, it is also the capital of Central Ethiopia Regional State (CERS). All this comes with complications, according to the chief administrator of Lemo woreda:

Hosanna is more than just an independent town; it serves as the capital for both the Hadiya and Lemo regions. Historically, Hosanna was part of Lemo woreda, and it remains a central hub for Lemo with its own parallel administration, though it is still within Lemo's traditional territory. Our responsibility in Lemo woreda is to

34 Interview with a farmer who sold his land to a returnee migrant through elders' mediation but whose son is trying to reclaim the plot, urging his father to default on the deal. Although the land was effectively sold, the farmer still has legal ownership. Ashe Kebele, Lemo woreda, September 2023.

oversee and protect the town, ensuring that its development aligns with our mandate. Originally, Hosanna's boundaries were defined from neighbourhood 18 to Gofer Meda (south to north), from Batena to Hospital Sefer (east to west), and from Heto Secondary School to Michael Sefer. The remaining areas were part of Lemo woreda. However, Hosanna has grown significantly and now extends into parts of Lemo woreda, sometimes encroaching upon land traditionally occupied by Lemo farmers. This expansion has led to disputes and a need for clear boundary definitions. With recent government decisions addressing the border issue between Hosanna and Lemo woreda, land near Neremo has been incorporated into the Hosanna town map. While these changes are being implemented, it is important to clarify that the Hadiya zone administration will not be taking additional areas from Lemo woreda to Hosanna. Such actions are not feasible.³⁵

Among the localities taken over from Lemo woreda in the recent past are Ashe, Bole, Secha, Bobicho and Naremo. As with the contestation between Addis Ababa and Oromia, that between Hosanna and Lemo can be framed in three ways.

The first centres on concern for the long-term welfare of Lemo farmers. This framing is primarily economic. It focuses on what happens to the peri-urban agrarian villages and households if Hosanna continues to expand at the expense of Lemo woreda. It is common that a few years after selling their land—normally their only productive asset—farming households will have spent all of what was perceived as a lot of money, and become destitute. This is especially the case if a relative's migration attempt fails. Given the increased probability of this happening in recent years due to stricter law enforcement en route, selling their land can amount to a losing gamble. This is a looming social crisis that is accumulating family by family and village by village, with the risk of serious conflicts in the future. The following quotes illustrate this:

I originally owned 1.4 hectares of land, but I now have less than 3,000 square meters remaining. I sold my land amid rumours that Hosanna town was planning to expand into our village, prompting a rush to sell off our farming land. We feared that if the area was classified as part of the town, we would be left empty-handed, with the government appropriating the land and reselling it at inflated prices. In response, we hurried to sell our land while we still could. With the proceeds, I built a new residence, sent one of my sons to South Africa, and bought Bajaj motorcycles for two of my other sons, helping them become independent. However, selling the land had significant downsides. Despite these investments, I now find myself buying food from the market. As a farmer, my skills are limited to agriculture. Without land, my primary source of livelihood is gone, leaving me effectively unemployed. When I sold my land, prices started at ETB 27,000 (USD 465) and peaked at ETB 350,000 (USD 6,000) for 1,000 square meters. At the time, this was a substantial sum and seemed like a good opportunity. However, those who purchased our land are now in a far better position

than we are. In retrospect, we did not benefit from the sale as we had hoped. Had we kept the land and our sons remained to work here, we might have been in a better economic situation today.³⁶

Farmers around Hosanna sold their farmland and are left empty handed. Because of this, some families have lost their livelihoods. This situation has created a huge economic gap between buyers and sellers. Because of this, sellers are betraying the buyers. Mediation and cultural meetings are everyday actions around Hosanna but it is very difficult for a case to go to court because there are no legal documents for buyers, except local agreements based on trust. Many have been betrayed after buying land from farmers. Those people don't simply leave their land easily. This may cause bloodshed among the people of the Hadiya. The administration of Lemo is not willing to allow the area to be demarcated as belonging to Hosanna. This can gradually lead to conflict and unnecessary costs. This needs a political solution. We have written letters more than ten times to the Hosanna town administration and Hadiya zone to solve our problem. But there is no solution.³⁷

The second way to frame the contestation is related to the loss of Hadiya culture and traditional way of life. Here, the claim is that the cultural space of Hosanna engulfs and displaces Hadiya culture as it expands. This is partly a continuation of the long-term trend—at least until recent years—of many Hadiya parents in Hosanna deciding not to give traditional Hadiya names to their children and not teaching them Hadiya culture. These trends have given rise to fears that continued urban influence and expansion of the town could threaten Hadiya culture on a larger scale. In particular, this preservationist discourse is adopted as part of the increasing nationalist view of younger Hadiya politicians. It is, however, felt by many, as this Lemo woreda administrator explains:

The central issue for the people of Lemo is preserving the Hadiya culture and language in the areas surrounding Hosanna. Both the Hadiya zone and Lemo woreda administrations are dedicated to this goal. We have three primary concerns in this regard: (1) Expansion of Hosanna: The town's expansion is encroaching into areas traditionally inhabited by the Hadiya people of Lemo. As new populations with different identities move in, the presence of Hadiyyisa speakers is diminishing, leading to the erosion of Hadiya identity and culture; (2) Cultural and linguistic erosion: The informal and uncontrolled development of the town is contributing to the decline of Hadiya culture and language. It is essential for both the zonal and Lemo administrations to regulate this growth and foster an environment that supports and preserves Hadiya heritage; and (3) Loss of traditional land and identity: The ongoing

36 Interview with Ato Alemu Sugamo, farmer in Lemo woreda, resident of Hosanna Zuria woreda, Hosanna, 12 December 2023.

37 Interview with Daniel, resident of the Hosanna area and a migrant from South Africa, Hosanna, 2 December 2023.

expansion is steadily reducing the land available to Lemo woreda, threatening its traditional identity and potentially leading to its complete destruction. Our efforts are aimed at safeguarding both Hadiya and Lemo identities. The Lemo administration is committed to protecting the Hadiya culture and ensuring that the expansion of Hosanna does not undermine these values. Our goal is not to target land grabbers but to prevent further erosion of our cultural and territorial integrity.³⁸

In the eyes of Lemo activists and many other Hadiya, rapid urbanization centred on Hosanna has engendered fear of ‘de-Hadiyaization’. This is despite the economic empowerment of Hadiya and the fact that anti-imperial Hadiya nationalism has been on the rise for decades. This suggests urbanization has not simultaneously fostered prosperity and traditionalism. There are several reasons for the fears. First, the Hadiyaization of Hosanna is only a recent phenomenon. One enduring impact of imperial rule is the pressure to assimilate; notably through changing personal and place names, and the self-doubt created by that. This relates to the spectre of being labelled ‘narrow nationalists’ throughout the EPRDF period, given the hostility from EPRDF towards the Hadiya National Democratic Organization and Hadiya activists more broadly. This, in turn, precluded the possibility of an organized cultural revivalist movement, as occurred in Oromia.

Added to this is the effect of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Regional State (SNNPRS) choosing Amharic as its working language in the 1990s, which contributed to more Hadiya parents deciding fluency in it was critical to their children’s life chances. The Hadiya zonal administration only introduced Hadiyyisa as its working language in 2015, and there is still a long way to go before it becomes its official language in practice. Because Hadiya bureaucratic elites are vested in and competent speakers of Amharic, they have little incentive to displace it with Hadiyyisa. Another fear is that urbanization will bring more diversity, as seen with the influx of non-Hadiya into Hosanna. Since around 2018, through the activism of Kabera, an informal Hadiya youth group, Hadiyaization in Hosanna began in earnest. What some Hadiya are therefore against is not urbanization per se but specific aspects of it that pose a threat to the Hadiya identity.

The third framing, which also integrates the first two, centres on the historical contestation between the Soro and Lemo clans. In response to the loss of territory in Lemo woreda, especially farmland in peri-urban areas, Lemo politicians have been resisting the expansion of Hosanna. In effect, the process of expansion has simultaneously meant that Lemo politicians are losing their constituencies and the woreda is missing out on revenue from business activities and fees for government services. These problems are compounded by questions about the legality of land sales in Lemo woreda and the risk of conflict associated with the impoverishment of Lemo farmers within a few years of selling their land. Many Lemo elite also argue that they are resisting urbanization for the good of the Hadiya language and culture as a whole. This respondent from Hosanna elaborates:

38 Interview with Eyob Chufamo, chief administrator of Lemo woreda, Hosanna, 11 December 2024.

The situation between Hosanna and Lemo woreda has been a topic of intense debate for many years. If unresolved within a carefully planned timeframe, it could potentially lead to conflict. Currently, many of the informally constructed houses around Hosanna fall under Lemo woreda jurisdiction. These properties, purchased from farmers and developed by migrants, lack legal documentation. As a result, the lands remain classified as agricultural, with the official landowners recognized by the government still being the original farmers, not the buyers. This issue requires urgent resolution. Both the zonal government and Lemo woreda need to provide solutions for those who have invested heavily in these properties. Failure to address this could escalate tensions and potentially lead to violence affecting the Hadiya people. Recent progress, such as the inclusion of areas from Larebah to Naramo into Hosanna, is a positive step. However, there are still many informally developed areas that need to be officially integrated into Hosanna to maintain peace among the Hadiya community. Addressing these areas before they become sources of conflict is crucial. Any solution must be equitable, benefiting both Lemo woreda and the broader Hadiya community. It is important to recognize the shared Hadiya identity of both parties. Governing bodies should approach this issue with maturity and avoid exacerbating ethnic tensions.³⁹

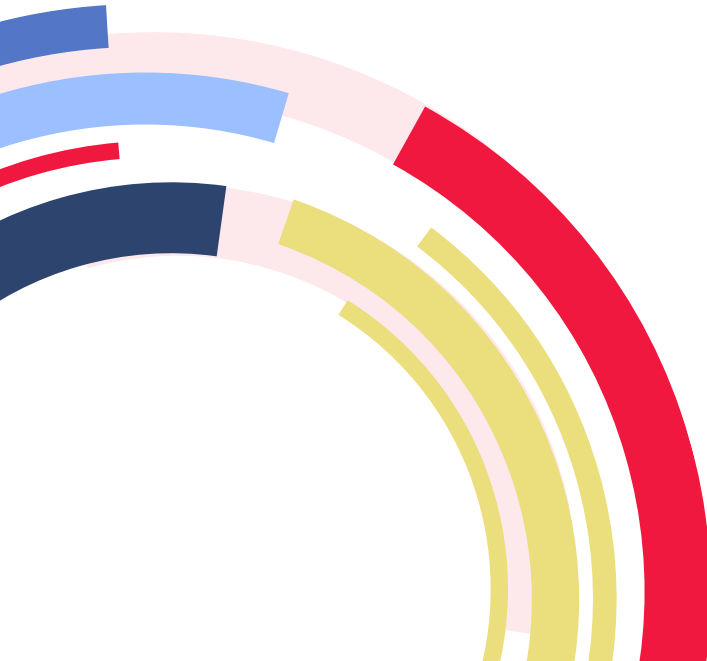
The perspective from Lemo woreda is less moderate. The conflict often involves the Lemo versus the Soro clan, reflecting broader tensions in contemporary Hadiya political dynamics. The Soro, a significant sub-group of the larger Boyamo clan, make up nearly two-thirds of the Hadiya population, but they wield less influence compared to the Lemo.⁴⁰ Some Lemo officials leverage the strategic location of Hosanna within their traditional territory, ensuring that the town's mayor is always from the Lemo clan. Lemo politicians are active participants in the town's expansion, which suggests that they have an interest in dominating the political and economic landscape of the growing urban area.

Additionally, some Lemo elites use the territorial integrity of Lemo woreda as a strategic tool to influence zonal politics and exert control over land-related resources. The ongoing controversy surrounding their proposal for a new Northern Hadiya zone—a move local rivals perceive as a cover for the creation of a 'Greater Lemo'—illustrates this dynamic. Currently, the Lemo clan is spread across five woredas. The proposed new zone is seen by rivals as a means to strengthen the Lemo's political leverage in Hadiya.

39 Interview with a key informant from the Hosanna municipality, Hosanna, 2 January 2022.

40 One good indicator of the contestation is the difficulty of agreeing on a common social history of the Hadiya. A year-long project to translate the anthropological work of Braukämper (2012) into Amharic and Hadiyissa for wider readership was stopped at the last minute because the political actors involved did not appreciate Braukämper's representation of one clan (the Soro) being superior to the other (the Lemo). The issue was temporarily resolved after it was decided to burn all copies of the book distributed among the Hadiya. See: Ulrich Braukämper, *A History of the Hadiyya in Southern Ethiopia*, trans. Geraldine Krause, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012.

The solution to alleviate tensions is the Hosanna Integrated Plan (HIP) proposed in 2021 by Hosanna municipality in partnership with Wachemo University. This aims to manage peri-urbanization systematically and equip the town administration to handle the rapid increase in demand for social services. Unfortunately, these efforts have yet to yield results, as the HIP remained as a proposal, never implemented. Hosanna and Lemo administrations have not yet addressed the creeping expansion of Hosanna into Lemo woreda. Additionally, the HIP does not contain practical measures for managing this unplanned growth. Instead, the zonal leadership has acted unilaterally, incorporating six peri-urban kebeles from Lemo woreda into Hosanna town.



CONTESTED PUBLIC SPACES: RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Public space in Hosanna has been contested from early in the town's history. This has taken an ideological form acted out in competition among religious communities and neo-traditionalists to fashion the town in the image of their own community. There are three major religious communities in Hosanna: Orthodox Christians, Protestants and Muslims. There is also an emerging neo-traditionalist group engaged in cultural revivalism (popular among youth), including the traditional Hadiya belief system, Fandaanano.⁴¹ Over time, the dominant religious community has changed.

For most of their recorded past, especially from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, the Hadiya were known primarily due to the powerful Hadiya Sultanate, which was part of a wider network of Islamic principalities that were tributary to the Sultanate of Adal.⁴² The Hadiya Sultanate was engaged in protracted conflicts with the northern Christian empire until the fifteenth century when Emperor Zera Yacob (a Christian and member of the Solomonic Dynasty) arranged a political marriage with the Sultan of Hadiya, *Gerad* (King) Mohammed. Zera Yacob married Gerad Mohammed's daughter, who later became a powerful figure in her own right. She was known in the Christian empire as Queen Mother Eleni, a consummate strategist acknowledged to have initiated diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Europe.⁴³ Although the Hadiya Sultanate became a tributary of the Christian empire after this political union via marriage, it nevertheless continued to resist, albeit on a small scale. For example, the Hadiya Sultanate joined the wars of the 1520s and 1530s conducted by Ahmed Grag, the Imam of the Adal Sultanate (1527–1543).⁴⁴

When imperial rule was established in Hosanna in the early twentieth century, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church also arrived. The first church building was St Michael in the centre surrounding the *ghibi*, the imperial court. Except for those few who converted into Orthodox Christianity, the Hadiya were barred from entering Hosanna on the grounds that they would pollute (*irkuset*) the town. This ban was apparently meant to hasten Hadiya assimilation into

41 The distinction between Protestants and neo-traditionalists is blurred as the latter have a less purist version of the faith. Only a small number of Hadiya still practice the traditional belief system.

42 Braukämper, History of the Hadiyya.

43 Tadesse Tamrat, 'Church and State in Ethiopia (1270–1527)', PhD thesis, University of London, 1968. Accessed 18 July 2024, <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/28644/1/10672804.pdf>.

44 Ahmed Grag, his Amharic name, is also known as Gurey in Somali. The Arabic version is Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi.

Orthodox culture. Not only did Hosanna become a predominantly Amharic-speaking town but even non-Orthodox Hadiya were drawn into the Orthodox cultural orbit. A good example of this—which also reflects the broader pattern of blending together national, ethnic and religious identities in imperial Ethiopia—is the assimilation of an ancient Hadiya new year celebration, Yahude, into the Orthodox Mesqel ceremony. Celebrated in the last week of September, around the same time Yahude is celebrated, Mesqel commemorates finding the true cross upon which Jesus was crucified. Reflecting its syncretic element, Yahude was then renamed as Yahude-Masqala. Similar processes of cultural assimilation also occurred in other parts of southern Ethiopia.

The ideology of Hadiya resistance to the political, economic and cultural imperialism took different forms. Initially, it was expressed through the revitalization of traditional beliefs. As one study indicates:

In the years following the imperial conquest, spirit possession cults seem to have sprung up all over Hadiya, probably in response to the social stress and lack of cultural orientation that was a consequence of the Amharic [sic] conquest. Supposedly they also filled a leadership vacuum that came, not least at the local level, as a result of the replacement of the old traditional ruling system with the new Amharic [sic] lords.⁴⁵

In the 1920s, major developments occurred with the advent of missionaries in southern Ethiopia, spearheaded by the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) led by the influential Thomas Lambie. The SIM ultimately evolved into the Kale Hiwot church. As with traditional believers, the missionaries and the budding Hadiya Protestant community were not represented in distinctly Orthodox Hosanna. Instead, SIM missionaries established a station in Lambude, 8 km from the town. The Protestant community rapidly rose to prominence partly as a form of resistance ideology that reflected a trend in the newly conquered south where the Orthodox church was strongly identified with repressive imperial rule. Conversion was also facilitated by the perception that the Protestant God was more benign and giving than the demanding God of the Orthodox church. This perception was reinforced by the fact that the missionaries were de facto agents of modernization, establishing schools and clinics well ahead of whatever the Ethiopian state could offer the Hadiya.⁴⁶ This quiet Protestant revolution spread rapidly in rural areas of Hadiya and created a social rupture in Hadiya history and social fabric: a distinctly Protestant present that defies its Islamic past and an even longer encounter with Orthodox Christianity. The majority of Hadiya are currently members of one of the two mainstream Protestant churches in Ethiopia: Kale Hiwot or the Lutheran Mekane Yesus churches.

45 Finn Aaseboe Roenne, 'Conversion and Proselytization in Southern Ethiopia. A Historical and Comparative Perspective', in *Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement, Volume 1*, eds. Éloi Ficquet, Ahmed Hassen Omer and Thomas Osmond, Addis Ababa and Los Angeles: Centre français des études éthiopiennes, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.cfee.1151>.

46 For example, see: Donald Donham, *Marxist Modern. An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

The 1974 revolution brought further changes to the social and physical landscape in Hosanna. As was the case elsewhere, it meant the loss of the political, economic and social privileges that the Orthodox church had long enjoyed. In particular, the loss of political leverage meant Orthodox Christianity declined in subsequent years and progressively became a second-class religious community in Hosanna and beyond. Correspondingly, Protestantism increasingly rose in status, coming to inform Hadiya self-understanding as the vanguard of Protestantism in southern Ethiopia. Political change in 1991 and the new ethno-political order induced yet more disruption. Self-rule led to the creation of the Hadiya administrative zone, which boosted Hadiya self-confidence. This was expressed in the form of a revival of traditional practices, with nationalistic overtones. Foremost among these is the Yahude celebration, which reverted to its original name once again (dropping the ‘Masqala’).⁴⁷

Whether Yahude and other similar festivals are cultural or spiritual is a subject of debate. The ethnonationalists in these groups promote them as cultural. They use them as platforms both for nationalist mobilization and for trying to transcend internal diversity, as in the case of trying to overcome cleavages between Hadiya traditional believers, Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Protestants. Some nationalists, for example, portray assertions that Yahude is an Orthodox celebration as tantamount to re-writing Hadiya history.⁴⁸

Hadiya Orthodox Christians continue to refer to the Meskel celebration as ‘Yahude-Masqala,’ helping to bridge any gaps between their Hadiya identity and Orthodox Christian faith. They aspire to connect more deeply with the Ethiopian Great Tradition,⁴⁹ which is closely associated with the Orthodox Church. Hadiya Orthodox Christians take pride in their links to Queen Eleni, a medieval ruler of Hadiya origin who served as Empress of Ethiopia from 1434 to 1468 and later as queen regent. Some even assert that the Meskel bonfire (*demera*) is a Hadiya cultural practice that Queen Eleni introduced to the north.

During the public debate in 2018 on which historical figures should be celebrated in the Hadiya zone, Orthodox Hadiya lobbied for a monument of Queen Eleni to increase Hadiya representation in Hosanna’s public spaces. Although this was unsuccessful, they had previously succeeded in renaming a public hospital from Comrade Mengistu Hailemariam Hospital to Nigist (Queen) Eleni Mohamed Memorial Hospital.

47 Yahude is reminiscent of similar neo-traditionalist celebrations among Hadiya neighbours; namely, the Oromo (Irrecha), Sidama (Chambalala) and Gedeo (Deeraro).

48 Abb. Girma Manniso Waaxumo, ‘The Yaahode Masqala is a Cherished Hadiya People’s New Year Celebration Tradition, not Necessarily a Religious One’, Themes on the Hadiya People of Ethiopia, Accessed 25 October 2024, <https://hadiyajourney.com/the-yaahode-masqala-is-a-cherished-hadiya-peoples-new-year-celebration-tradition-not-necessarily-a-religious-one/>.

49 History, and political visions, in Ethiopia are mainly contested between what is called ‘Great Tradition’ which centers on the hegemony of northern cultures (language-Amharic, religion-Orthodox Christianity) and historical narratives, and the ‘Counter Histories’ from the southern regions, primarily the Oromo and the Somali. See Sara Marzagora, ‘History in Twentieth Century Ethiopia: The Great Tradition and the Counter-Histories of National Failure’. *The Journal of African History*, 58/3 (2017): 425–44.

This bid to monumentalize the Orthodox queen did not materialize in part because of the push back from Hadiya nationalists, both neo-traditionalists and Protestants. As a senior Hadiya zone official who participated in the selection states:

We rejected the proposal to erect a monument for Eleni outright because she was the reason why the Hadiya Sultanate declined. Had it not been for what she and her uncle did in the massacre of the *Gerads*, Hadiya would have been in a much better position to keep the territories and peoples of the Hadiya Sultanate intact.⁵⁰

The contestation between religious communities over public spaces in Hosanna takes two forms. First, there is the joint Protestant and neo-traditionalist alliance against the Orthodox Christians. Second, there is conflict between Protestants and neo-traditionalists.

In 2020, the competition for public space in Hosanna came to a head when the Orthodox Christian leadership requested permission to build a church and celebrate the Epiphany in Gofer Meda, where Yahude and other events are held. The attraction of Gofer Meda for Orthodox Christians is the reservoir built by the Derg to store water for Hosanna, as at the heart of the celebration is a mass baptism and blessing that re-enacts John's baptism of Jesus Christ. To obtain permission, Orthodox activists eventually agreed not to build a permanent structure. This agreement, however, was disingenuous and a church was erected in Gofer Meda. While Protestant Hadiya are unhappy about the growing visibility of Orthodox Christianity, their capacity to oppose this is circumscribed by historical realities. The strongest opposition to the Orthodox Church's attempt to build a structure at Gofer Meda came from Kabera, an informal youth group with a neo-traditional orientation.⁵¹

Kabera has filled the political void created by the weakening of opposition parties. Whereas resistance had been centred around the Hadiya National Democratic Organization (HNDO) during the EPRDF regime, there is currently no organized opposition politics linked to the contestations in Hosanna. In the wake of a major crackdown by EPRDF following a formidable HNDO challenge to its hegemony, opposition politics has been discredited and securitized. Any form of dissent was labelled 'narrow nationalism'. After 2018, the HNDO transformed itself into a national party: the Ethiopian Social Democratic Party (ESDP), led by the late Professor Beyene Petros, who previously led the more popular HNDO. ESDP has little or no local resonance in Hosanna, however. This was evident in the June 2021 election, when the party did not win a single seat at either the regional or the federal level. Instead, political space is dominated by the Hadiya branch of the Prosperity Party, with competition taking place within the ruling party, rather than between competing parties.

50 Interview with senior official in the Hadiya zone administration, Hosanna, 8 November 2023. One exception is worth noting: Built by the Derg, the sole hospital in Hosanna was originally named the Mengistu Hailemariam Hospital but was renamed the Queen Eleni Mohammed Hospital in the early years of self-rule under the EPRDF government.

51 This informal Hadiya youth group is equivalent to the Qeerroo of the Oromo, with which it is well networked. Kabera translates as 'the fingertip of a leopard'.

The alternative political space in Hosanna is created and occupied by the Kabera, whose members struggled for self-determination and social justice during the last years of the EPRDF (2016-2018). Kabera is named after a leopard, symbolizing courage and power for the Hadiya. Supported by the Oromia Media Network,⁵² the Kabera established the Hadiya Media Network, which champions Hadiya nationalism. Taking cues from the Sidama bid for a Sidama region and emboldened by the nationalist activism of the Kabera, in the wake of political reforms in 2018 and 2019, Hadiya zonal leaders pressed for the establishment of Hadiya regional state. Ultimately, this proposal was dropped following combined pressure from the federal and SNNPRS governments. Subsequently, some Kabera members were coopted by the new zonal leadership and others continued nationalist activism. Different factions within the zonal-level Prosperity Party vie for Kabera support, both legitimizing the power of the group and preventing it from evolving into a formal opposition party.

Kabera influence is clear in the competition for public spaces in Hosanna. For example, shortly after the Orthodox church was built at *Gofer Meda*, Kabera demolished it. This incident went viral in both Orthodox media outlets and in opposition media such as Ethio 360. The *Gofer Meda*



Epiphany celebrations take place in Hosanna after three years. Photograph by OCP News Service, 18 January 2022. See note 53.

52 This reflects a broader pattern of Oromo nationalist alliance formation with southern elites, especially since the 2018 political reform began and the subsequent reconfiguration of ethnic power connected to this. One of the founders of the Oromia Media Network, Jawar Mohammed, was a leading organizer of the 2014–2016 Oromo protests. He is credited with helping to unseat the incumbent EPRDF government in February 2018 and bringing Abiy Ahmed to power.

incident was used to vocalize a new sense of victimhood and siege mentality in the Orthodox Christian community in the wake of political reform and the proliferation of communal violence, especially the ethnically and religiously targeted killing of Amhara and Orthodox Christians, primarily in Oromia. After the church demolition, and following the subsequent refusal of the zonal administration to grant land to the Orthodox Christian community, the church boycotted the 2020 Epiphany celebration as a symbolic protest, communicating its grievances to the public and presenting the provision of land to build a house of worship as a constitutional right.

Orthodox media reports implicated the Hadiya government in religious rights violations:

Orthodox Christians in Hosanna were banned from celebrating Meskel and Epiphany for the last three years due to mistreatment of the zonal and town government bodies. The government refrained from responding to the questions from the Archbishop of Silte and Hadiya dioceses as well as Orthodox faithful about the ownership issue of historical celebration places. Instead, they arrested Orthodox youth who protested the injustice.⁵³

The Orthodox Church's claim to a public space in Hosanna ignited a strong reaction from Kabera and sparked intense debate between the zonal administration and the regional cabinet.⁵⁴ Facing staunch opposition from Kabera, and a firm rebuff from the zonal administration, members of the Orthodox Church sought support from influential Orthodox political networks with strong connections at the regional level. Notably, the then-SNNPRS president and senior Hadiya regional administrators were Orthodox Christians, which gave the lobbying efforts considerable weight.

This situation contrasted sharply with the zonal administration, which was predominantly Protestant and neo-traditionalist, and had firmly rejected the Orthodox Church's request for land in Gofer Meda. In response to the zonal administration's refusal, regional authorities applied pressure and convened a series of public meetings involving both the religious communities and Kabera representatives. Although the Kabera defended Gofer Meda as a protected Hadiya public space, they agreed to a compromise: offering an alternative site of 20,000 m² in the Hosanna Saturday marketplace for the Orthodox Church.⁵⁵

53 'Epiphany Celebrations to take Place in Hosana City After Three Years', Orthodoxy Cognate Page, Pan-Orthodox Christian (NGO) Society. Accessed 18 July 2024, <https://ocpsociety.org/epiphany-celebrations-to-take-place-in-hosaena-city-after-three-years/>.

54 According to the zonal administration president, Hadiya zonal authorities interpret the tussle with the regional government as emblematic of the obstructions and diversions of the Hadiya share of resources by the SNNPR establishment. Interview with zonal administration president, Hosanna, 6 July 2021.

55 The Orthodox Church was unhappy about this location as it is considered unclean and is outside the centre. Moreover, the grant was conditional: 18,000 m² of this land could be used as an open space to celebrate Epiphany and other Orthodox holidays, with only the remaining 2,000 m² permitted for building infrastructure. Interview with an Orthodox clergy, Hosanna, 4 June 2023.

In stark contrast to the competing interests of Protestant and Orthodox communities, the Kabera oppose any land grants in Gofer Meda—whether to religious groups or real estate developers. Their goal is to preserve Gofer Meda as a protected public space dedicated to celebrating traditional Hadiya practices. A symbolic representation of this vision is the renaming of Gofer Meda to Hadiyyi Nafara, meaning ‘the lung of Hadiya’ in Hadiyyisa, underscoring its role as a communal breathing space.

Ultimately, the Kabera’s efforts succeeded. A decision was made to safeguard Hadiyyi Nafara as a designated cultural site. The zonal administration invested ETB 730 million (USD 12.6 million) to fence and upgrade the area, with ETB 30 million (USD 517,000) coming from World Bank funding. As a result, Hadiyyi Nafara has become a prominent Hadiya cultural heritage centre, where Yahude is celebrated with grandeur and attracts national dignitaries, including the mayor of Addis Ababa and the minister of culture and tourism. Beyond reinforcing Yahude as a vital Hadiya cultural practice, Hadiyyi Nafara serves as a venue for broader cultural and political networking among neighbouring Hadiya-related communities.



The upgraded Hadiyyi Nafara site. Photo by research team, 8 August 2023.

Enclosed within the broader contestation between the predominantly non-Hadiya Orthodox Christians and the neo-traditional Hadiya, there is a distinct dynamic involving Hadiya Protestants. Initially, Protestants and neo-traditionalists, particularly the Kabera, formed a coalition to exclude Orthodox Christians from Gofer Meda/Hadiyyi Nafara. However, this uneasy alliance eventually dissolved. As a result, Protestants have grown increasingly resentful of the resurgence of Hadiya cultural traditions and continue to express concerns about the influence of the Orthodox Church.

Over the years, Hosanna has developed a distinctly Protestant public face, thus reinforcing Hadiya self-understanding as the vanguard of Protestantism in Ethiopia. In addition to the mainstream Kale Hiwot and Mekane Yesus churches, non-denominational charismatic mega churches have proliferated in Hosanna, bringing with them prophetic claims and promises of redemption. In 2001, for example, a prophecy delivered to a massive congregation in Gofer Meda by Pastor Peter Youngren, the Canadian founder of the World Impact Ministries, highlighted a special relationship between Protestant Hadiya and God. As recounted by several research participants, hundreds of thousands of Hadiya and others from neighbouring areas reportedly attended this gathering to hear Youngren’s prophetic message announcing that God had opened

a southern route to South Africa—described as a sacred destination—for the Hadiya through which prosperity and socio-economic transformation would come.⁵⁶ More recently, Protestant Pentecostal pastors lobbied the Hadiya government to grant Gofer Meda land for Pastor Yonatan Aklilu, a high-profile figure close to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, to build his controversial youth coaching centre, Melkam Wetat (Excellent Youth) that partly targets Orthodox youth and disparages the theological teachings of the Orthodox Church. Although this bid ultimately failed, he was granted 50,000 m2 of land elsewhere in Hosanna.⁵⁷

Seeking to preserve the prominent status of their religion, Protestant leaders now focus on the dangers of the increased visibility of the Orthodox Church and the renewal of traditional belief in Hosanna and Hadiya zone. They express their discontent by delegitimizing the Orthodox celebration of Mesqel and Epiphany, openly disparaging them as un-Christian, and deriding Yahude as idolatry. They also object to the secular features of Yahude such as worldly songs and dance. The 2023 Yahude concert, organized by beer breweries, lent support to Protestant leaders defining Yahude in terms of a sign of spiritual decay.

In August 2023, ahead of the Yahude celebrations scheduled for the end of September, the Kale Hiwot church in Hosanna issued a decree discouraging Protestants from attending. This message was further reinforced by Yohannes Girma, a well-known Hadiya pastor in Addis Ababa, who has also denounced Yahude as un-Christian.⁵⁸ Facing strong pushback from neo-traditionalists (most of whom are also Protestant), Pastor Yohannes retracted his statement and limited his denouncement to the Oromo thanksgiving celebration Irrecha.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, as a result of the intensive Kale Hiwot campaign, the 2023 Yahude celebration did not have the grand flair of previous years.

A tragic event offered yet another perspective, however. The death of four well-known pastors en route from Hosanna to Addis Ababa shortly before the 2023 Yahude celebrations was invoked by neo-traditionalists as proof that the curse Hadiya elders put on the denouncers of Yahude was working.⁶⁰ In addition to this neo-traditionalist interpretation, there is a moral element of the defence of Yahude. One elder succinctly sums this up: 'It is unfair that pastors denounce

56 Feyissa, 'Beyond economics'. This sacred script guiding Hadiya migration to South Africa is also reinforced by local charismatic prophets and pastors, fuelling the aspirations and spiritually animated capabilities that have informed the Hadiya migration project. For example, see: Dereje Feyissa, Jessica Hagen-Zanker and Caterina Mazzilli, 'The Entanglement Between Tangible and Intangible Factors in Shaping Hadiya Migration Aspirations to South Africa', *International Migration Review* 0/0 (6 February 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183241226635>.

57 Hosanna is the third site that Pastor Yonatan identified to build a Melkam Wetat centre nationally. The other two are Addis Ababa and Hawassa.

58 Interview with a member of Zetseat Apostolic Reformation Church, Addis Ababa, 2 December 2023.

59 Interview with church leader, Hosanna, 3 January 2024.

60 Interview with an elder, Hosanna, 27 December 2023.

Yahude, a once-in-a-year opportunity for us to feast, while they are so rich that they feast every day.⁶¹

The public debate between cultural traditionalists and purist Protestants raises a question about whether ethnic or religious identity comes first. Reflecting on this dilemma, a neo-traditional Protestant youth in Hosanna asserts: ‘We were Hadiya first before we became Protestants. Religious identity changes but ethnic identity remains constant. We were Fandaanano. Then we became Muslims and then Protestants. In all these changes, we have been Hadiya through and through.’⁶²

In the end, in the contest over Gofer Meda/Hadiyyi Nafara, both the Orthodox Christians and Protestants lost the land that they had acquired or were promised. Instead, they were given alternative sites. Rebuffed by his bid to build a Melkam Wetat centre in Gofer Meda, Pastor Yonatan lost momentum and, as of 2024, has shown no interest to develop the alternative site he was given. In contrast, the neo-traditionalist Kabera have managed to protect Gofer Meda as a major Hadiya cultural site in the heart of Hosanna.

61 Interview with a Hadiya elder, Hosanna, 5 December 2023.

62 Interview with neo-traditional Protestant youth, Hosanna, 28 December 2023.



THE BUMPY ROAD TO A REGIONAL CAPITAL

One of the most visible developments in the wake of the 2018 reforms is the acrimonious dissolution of SNNPRS into four regional states. Spearheaded by Sidama nationalists, demands for new regional states proliferated. Although the Sidama quest has a longer history that goes back to the student movement of the 1960s, in recent years it gathered momentum with a strong urban component. The desire to get full control over Hawassa—one of the most vibrant and largest cities in Ethiopia, and one that served as a capital for SNNPRS and Sidama zone for more than three decades—significantly informed the terms of Sidama nationalism.⁶³ The Sidama campaign stimulated similar demands elsewhere in SNNPRS. Accordingly, 12 zonal administrations, including Hadiya zone, voted to leave SNNPRS and establish separate regional states.

As in the competition for public space in Hosanna, the Kabera were at the forefront of Hadiya nationalism championing the establishment of a Hadiya region. They were supported and encouraged by the zonal administration under the leadership of Ayalew Zinaw, who aspired to a greater Hadiya project before he was deposed by the SNNPRS administration for being extremist. In contrast, at home he was admired for his nationalist credentials. In their self-understanding, the Kabera are imbued with a sense of mission and social responsibility. This former prominent Kabera member elaborates:

Kabera's pursuit of Hadiya statehood represents a continuation of the efforts by previous generations to reclaim Hadiya's lost power. This struggle is deeply rooted in nonviolent resistance and the lived experiences of the Hadiya people. The term 'Kabera' translates to 'leopard,' an animal traditionally revered among the Hadiya for its courage, strength, intelligence and determination. This symbolism reflects the belief that Hadiya youth, embodying these leopard-like qualities, are central to the ongoing fight for the nation's survival. Since 2018, Kabera has been dedicated to fostering an inclusive Hadiya nationalist identity among the youth. Over the past three years, Kabera members have been actively teaching Hadiya history, the true role of the Hadiya people in Ethiopia, the background of their struggle and heroism, and aspects of Hadiya culture. This movement for Hadiya self-determination has also played a

63 Morris Kiruga, 'The Sidama crisis and escalating demands for statehood challenge Ethiopian constitution', *The Africa Report*, 2 August 2019. Accessed 15 July 2024, <https://www.theafricareport.com/15883/the-sidama-crisis-and-escalating-demands-for-statehood-challenge-ethiopian-constitution/>.

role in rekindling unity among various Hadiya sub-groups, such as the Mareqo and Qabena, who had been distanced from the broader Hadiya community for decades. As a result, the political struggle for Hadiya's rights is gaining increasing momentum.⁶⁴

Political reform thus created new possibilities for Hadiya nationalists, even allowing them to indulge in the Greater Hadiya project that aims to restore the medieval Hadiya Sultanate; a territory much larger than Hadiya zone. The imagined boundaries of Greater Hadiya include neighbouring areas such as the Silte and Halaba as well as the lost tribes of the Hadiya, the Mareqo and the Qabena, currently located in Gurage zone. During the process of SNNPRS's dissolution, Hadiya nationalists intensified political networks among this group, all members of the historic Hadiya Sultanate. This new political imaginary envisions Hosanna as the political capital and economic hub. Members of this imagined community were promised incentives, such as economically displacing the Gurage, especially the Qabena, who, like the Gurage, have a reputation for business acumen. To be expected, the Greater Hadiya project caused tension with Gurage nationalists, who had already faced demands from the Mareqo and Qabena for self-administering woredas. The latter also advanced ownership claims over Welkite town, the seat of Gurage zonal administration.

The Office of the Prime Minister discouraged the proliferation of regional states in favour of a multi-ethnic cluster approach that aggregates historically and culturally related groups into regions. One of the proposed clusters was Central Ethiopia Regional State (CERS). The Gurage were among those who expressed the strongest opposition to the cluster approach but the Hadiya acquiesced. Some Hadiya groups, especially among the diaspora, however, preferred a Hadiya regional state:

Some members of the Hadiya diaspora and local politicians mistakenly believe that supporting a cluster-based regional state arrangement will lead to the integration of Qabena and Mareqo into Hadiya. This assumption is flawed and undermines both the dignity of the Hadiya people and the legitimacy of their quest for statehood. The focus should be on achieving a distinct Hadiya Regional State rather than pursuing a cluster-based approach.⁶⁵

Those who revised their stance to accept the cluster approach argued that this would better serve Hadiya interests than the immediate formation of a Hadiya region. As their argument goes, a cluster-based region in central Ethiopia would create new political space for the Hadiya to reconnect with the lost clans, especially the Mareqo and Qabena. This new political entity would also be destined to be dominated by the Hadiya. The establishment of the Qabena and Mareqo special woredas would undermine both the political and demographic standing of

64 Interview with member and leader of Kabera, Hosanna, 13 November 2023.

65 Hadiya Scholars Forum in North America, 'Roadmap for Hadiya Statehood', Themes on the Hadiya People of Ethiopia, Accessed 15 July 2024, <https://hadiyajourney.com/a-roadmap-to-statehood-equality-and-justice-for-the-hadiya-people-of-ethiopia/>.

Gurage, already weakened by the separation of the Silte from the zone in the 1990s. Intense politicking occurred in Hosanna, the de facto capital of the envisioned Hadiya Sultanate.

A manifestation of this new political imaginary was a song released by representatives of the Hadiya, Silte, Halaba, Mareqo and Qabena, entitled ‘Hadiya our ancestor’. The song promotes unity and is based on the shared historical memory of being part of a wider polity: the Hadiya Sultanate. The song was performed by representatives of the five communities at cultural and political gatherings in Hosanna, including during the Yahude celebrations from 2021 to 2023.⁶⁶



The ‘Hadiya is our ancestor’ song being performed in the 2022 Yahude celebration, Hosanna. Hadiyya Media House, 28 September 2022.⁶⁷

Gurage nationalists took offence at the message of the song as it excludes their group. The animosity was further reinforced by the border dispute between Hadiya and Gurage zones at Qose. Some Gurage nationalists have also increasingly sought alliances with Amhara counterparts based on shared historical consciousness and grievances related to being ethnically targeted.

When the Office of the Prime Minister insisted on the cluster approach despite the resistance, Gurage nationalists in the Prosperity Party eventually acquiesced. Contention then shifted to the question of which town would be the new region’s capital. Counting on its larger population, ethnic diversity and relatively central geographic location, Hadiya nationalists were confident that Hosanna would be chosen. The Gurage, in contrast, pressed for a multi-city approach

66 Signalling the emergence of Hosanna as a cultural and political hub that extends well beyond Hadiya zone, the Seera celebration of the Halaba, which is equivalent to Yahude, was held for the first time in Hosanna in January 2024.

67 ‘Hadiya is our Ancestor’, Hadiyya Media House, 28 September 2022. Accessed 16 December 2024, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=mOkVIIInuj2l&si=4mz9Wu5G1ThhTKoH>.

(*bizeha ketema*).⁶⁸ Reflective of their apprehension about the Greater Hadiya project, Gurage zone proposed Butajira as the seat of the regional presidency because Welkite, the capital of Gurage zone, is claimed by the Hadiya-related Qabena. Arguments were made against Hosanna on the grounds that it is ‘a town which is already eaten up’. The Gurage claimed that most land in Hosanna is already taken over by investors, whereas Butajira was hailed as fresh and closer to the beautiful Rift Valley lakes.⁶⁹

Remembering the experience of what happened when Sidama region was established with Hawassa as its capital and the consequences for SNNPRS, other ethnic groups in the south aspire to take the route Sidama nationalists pursued with Hawassa—making a city that had benefited from being the economically dynamic seat of a multi-ethnic regional government into their own capital.

For the Hadiya, this aspiration is also driven by a strong sense of relative deprivation. A standard position taken by Hosanna residents and those of Hadiya zone is the feeling of being abandoned in terms of public and private investment. Although it has Wachemo University and Queen Eleni Hospital, unlike many other cities, Hosanna does not have an industrial park nor any standalone factories. From their perspective, this is particularly hard to justify as Hadiya has avoided ethnic conflict and has strong Ethiopian nationalist credentials, producing notable figures such as Queen Eleni; Fitawrari Geja, the Adwa hero; Colonel Bezabih, the Ethio-Eritrean war hero (1998–2000); and the recently deceased politician, Professor Beyene Petros, one of the pioneers of peaceful opposition politics in Ethiopia. If Hosanna was chosen as the regional capital, locals hoped this would attract public and private investment. The new Hadiya economic elites, most connected to migration to South Africa, also aspire to reach larger markets.

The Hadiya are divided into two competing power blocs—in shorthand, referred to as the Lemo camp and the Soro camp—currently located at the federal (Addis Ababa) and regional (then Hawassa) governments, respectively. This also raised the stakes as both camps exaggerated the existential nature of the competition and presented themselves as champions of Hosanna, countering the political leverage of Gurage at the regional level who were believed to have lobbied for Butajira and Worabe. The day before the final decision was made, Hosanna youth mobilized and threatened to burn down the town should the decision favour other towns, with some even said to have bought kerosene.⁷⁰

68 The multi-city approach was adopted in the first regional state to be formed based on the cluster approach, South West Ethiopia Regional State (SWERS). The federal government is keen to avoid what may be termed ‘the Hawassa specter’, whereby a single city developed at the expense of not only other towns in SNNPRS but the entire region in a typical enclave development fashion. Interview with a senior federal government official, Addis Ababa, 12 November 2023.

69 Interview with a Gurage government official who participated in the Welkite meeting, Butajira, 5 November 2013.

70 Interview with a Hadiya federal parliamentarian who participated in the meeting, Hosanna, 23 November 2023.

The outcome was a well-crafted balancing act. The two top government and party positions went to the Gurage and Hadiya. A Gurage was elected as president of CERS, whereas the regional Prosperity Party leadership position went to a Hadiya. Hosanna was chosen as the seat for the regional president (*Ye Erise Biher Meqemecha*) and Welkite (if not Butajira) as the seat for the regional council (*Ye Mikir Bet Meqemecha*). There was, however, a last-minute fight between Hadiya and Gurage nationalists. In the draft CERS constitution, the Gurage preferred to leave a blank space where the name of the regional capital should be and proposed a rotating seat for the regional president. A senior Hadiya official who participated in this meeting recalls the terms of the debate as follows:

I challenged Eristu's claim that job creation initiatives had been implemented in the Hadiya Zone. The Hadiya zone has been neglected by both federal and regional governments, with not a single factory established in Hosanna. In response to Eristu's proposal for a rotating seat for the regional president, I argued, "*Kilil yale meqemecha, bet yale miseso ayihonim*" [a state without a capital is like a house without a pillar]. His suggestion of a rotating seat, rather than a fixed regional capital, reflected a reluctance to endorse Hosanna, the most viable candidate. Ultimately, we succeeded in securing Hosanna's position as the seat of the regional president, though we had hoped for it to be designated as the capital of the Central Ethiopia Regional State.⁷¹

The sense of abandonment felt by the Hadiya is often interpreted as a form of retribution for their opposition to the EPRDF.⁷² The Hadiya zone was the only local government area where the EPRDF lost in the 2000 elections, and this trend has continued in subsequent elections. The politicization of the Soro and Lemo clan divisions is also linked to this EPRDF resentment, particularly reflecting the divide-and-rule tactics employed by the ruling coalition.

The only major recent public development project in Hosanna, Wachemo University, was established by the federal government in 2009, following a visit by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. This move was intended to recapture the Hadiya protest vote. As one of the few significant federal institutions in Hadiya zone, Wachemo University, which includes a teaching hospital, has played a role in the ongoing contestations in Hosanna. The university has been instrumental in promoting neo-traditionalism, notably through its Hadiyyisa language department, which produces literary works and documents cultural artifacts. In March 2024, Wachemo University signed a memorandum of understanding with the federal Ministry of Culture to preserve and promote the languages of CERS. Additionally, university staff contributed to the design of Hadiyyi Nafara.

Despite these efforts, the Kabera view the university's contributions as insufficient and politically motivated. They argue that Wachemo's actions fall short compared to the proactive role played by universities in other regions. As a Kabera activist noted, 'What Wachemo is doing

71 Interview with senior Hadiya official, Hosanna, 28 December 2023.

72 Feyissa et al. 'Entanglement'.

is no match for the efforts in Oromia, where universities actively promote Oromo culture and tradition. For example, Ambo University decorates all its events with Aba Gada colours'.⁷³

Currently, there is a strong feeling among many Hadiya regarding the need to be inward looking, with a focus on the politics of their environs. This differs from the previous orientation towards national politics and the economy. A zonal government official explains further:

Historically, the Hadiya people have been more oriented towards Addis Ababa than Hawassa. This preference is likely due to Hadiya's past association with Shewa province, which centred around Addis Ababa. As a result, many Hadiya individuals prefer to invest in Addis Ababa rather than Hawassa, the capital of the Sidama Regional State. This is evident in the growing Hadiya neighbourhoods around Jemmo in Addis Ababa. Despite being the fourth largest ethnic group in southern Ethiopia, Hadiya has not wielded political influence commensurate with its demographic size. Smaller groups like the Gamo and Gofa have been more active in regional politics. This disparity in political influence is partly due to internal Hadiya clan politics, where the Lemo and Soro factions have been at odds. For example, Melese Alemu's inability to become president of SNNPRS was a result of the opposing faction's support for a Gurage candidate.⁷⁴

The designation of Hosanna as the seat of the CERS presidency is seen by the Hadiya as only a partial victory. However, this new status has already drawn substantial financial resources into the Hosanna economy, both privately and municipally. This is evident in the surge of political conferences and other related activities. For instance, just days after CERS was established in October 2023, Hosanna hosted a series of Prosperity Party and regional government conferences, meetings and workshops. This led to a shortage of accommodation. In response to these demands, infrastructure improvements have been rapidly made. For example, a resident of Hosanna town said an asphalt road to the regional president's residence was constructed at 'light speed'. This is seen as a positive sign of likely future enhancements to Hosanna's infrastructure.⁷⁵ Additionally, the new status of Hosanna has spurred a housing boom. A notable example is a mansion built by a Hadiya migrant in South Africa, which is now being rented out for ETB 200,000 (USD 3,450) per month to serve as the regional president's residence. This reflects Hosanna's economic dynamism and hopes that it will become a fully-fledged regional capital.

Hadiya-owned businesses undertook an extensive door-to-door campaign to raise funds and influence the decision-making process for selecting the regional capital. Despite this determination to secure Hosanna's status, this process has potential downsides, particularly for

73 Interview with Kabera activist, Hosanna, 12 November 2023.

74 Interview with Hadiya zonal official, Hosanna, 19 January 2024.

75 Here again, SWERS experience is a reference point. The SWERS administration has found the *bizeha ketema* (multi-city) approach cumbersome. Consequently, it has been steadily inching toward making Bonga the de facto regional capital.

those who have invested in the expectation of increasing property prices. As the market heats up, there is the risk that the new regional government and Hadiya zonal administration seize land for public projects. Should this occur, investors might receive compensation significantly below market rates.

Additionally, becoming a political centre could come with increased federal government oversight. After the establishment of CERS, for instance, internal conflicts within the Prosperity Party surfaced. At the zonal level, political actors engaged in power struggles, with some using Facebook and other digital platforms to challenge their rivals. The new regional leadership responded with a crackdown, arresting dissenters and accusing them of psychological warfare. A Hadiya youth leader claimed the majority of those imprisoned were Hadiya youth from Hosanna. Protests against the zonal government's failure to pay civil servants' salaries and provide farmers with fertilizer were also swiftly repressed.⁷⁶

Ultimately, it remains to be seen whether the Hadiya's aspirations and expectations will be fulfilled through Hosanna's designation as the regional capital.



76 Interview with the leader of the Hadiya Youth Association, Hosanna, 7 January 2024.

CONCLUSION

The experience of Hosanna as a contested city mirrors patterns of urban conflict across contemporary Ethiopia, though each situation has its own characteristics. Population centres like Hosanna often become focal points for struggles among various communal groups and elites. The case study of Hosanna reveals various primary forms of contestation—both interethnic and intra-ethnic—each linked to larger political and socio-economic shifts.

In these conflicts, a diverse range of actors—including Kabera youth activists, political leaders, faith-based communities and traditional authorities—play significant roles. These layered contestations highlight the complexities of urban transformation and socio-political dynamics in Hosanna, reflecting broader trends in Ethiopian urban spaces.

Interethnic contestation occurs both at the political and socio-economic levels, as well as ideologically. The socio-economic struggle between the Hadiya and non-Hadiya centres on the renegotiation of historical social inequalities. As the Hadiya increasingly assert their influence in Hosanna's economic and political spheres—evident through ongoing gentrification—they challenge the previous dominance of non-Hadiya groups in Hosanna's public spaces. The ideological dimension of interethnic contestation manifests in the competition to control and define public spaces in Hosanna, including the contentious journey towards Hosanna's designation as a regional capital.

Within Hadiya society, contestation primarily revolves around the terms of peri-urbanization and its representation in clan politics. This internal conflict is deeply intertwined with issues of equality, resource distribution, political power and identity. The struggles over these issues can be seen across various platforms, including public spaces, peri-urban areas, council meetings, party gatherings, religious institutions and social media.

Over the past century, Hadiya society has experienced profound political and socio-economic changes. Once a garrison town, Hosanna has transformed into a pivotal political, economic and cultural hub for both the Hadiya people and CERS. By the end of the nineteenth century, following conquests, the Hadiya—formerly a formidable polity known as the Hadiya Sultanate—had been integrated as subjects within imperial Ethiopia. Despite this historical shift, the memory of their past grandeur remains a potent force, gaining renewed significance in contemporary politics.

This resurgence is particularly evident in the Greater Hadiya project, which has emerged alongside the dissolution of SNNPRS and the formation of new political structures. The Hadiya's interactions with neighbouring groups and their negotiations at inter-ethnic borders are deeply shaped by this enduring historical legacy. This historical memory is strategically leveraged

in today's socio-political struggles, illustrating the Hadiya's continued efforts to assert their identity and influence within the evolving political landscape.

One notable manifestation of this is the Hadiya's aspiration to designate Hosanna as a regional capital, reflecting their ambition to capitalize on the anticipated benefits of this status. This goal underscores the ongoing impact of their historical legacy on contemporary political and socio-economic dynamics.

The political revival among the Hadiya is closely tied to emerging economic trends. Central to this resurgence is the migration of Hadiya individuals to South Africa, which began in the late 1990s and surged in the early 2000s. This migration has had a transformative impact through the flow of resources—financial capital, goods, knowledge and ideas—across borders. The remittances and entrepreneurial skills gained from these South African experiences have significantly empowered migrants and their families, allowing them to gain a prominent foothold in Hosanna's economic landscape.

This shift has spurred a process of gentrification, displacing previously dominant groups to peri-urban areas. Notably, Hosanna's economic transformation has been relatively peaceful compared to many southern towns, particularly in Oromia, where urban disputes have often escalated into violence. In Hosanna, the change has been driven by non-political strategies, facilitating the Hadiya's enhanced economic influence and their integration into central spaces without the upheaval seen elsewhere.

The economic transformation driven by migration has exacerbated intra-ethnic tensions within Hadiya society, revealing new forms of inequality. Remittances from Hadiya migrants in South Africa have fuelled a burgeoning informal land market in Hosanna and its surrounding Lemo woreda, where migrants and new economic elites have acquired land from local farmers. This rapid peri-urbanization is occurring at an alarming rate, with transactions between speculators and farmers marked by significant disparities.

Farmers, despite recognizing the disadvantages of these deals, continue to sell their land to cover the costs of sending family members—particularly young men—to South Africa. This dynamic fosters a mutually reinforcing cycle: remittances accelerate urban expansion, while the growing awareness of inequities in land transactions breeds resentment and potential conflict. Such tensions risk violent confrontations between those benefiting from peri-urbanization and those left disadvantaged by it.

Moreover, the transformative potential of remittances is often undermined. Rather than being invested in productive sectors, these funds are recently frequently diverted into speculative ventures (especially real estate), or hoarded. The Ethiopian diaspora in South Africa, predominantly male migrants from Hadiya and Kambatta, and an increasing number of female migrants moving to the Arabian Gulf region, contribute to a substantial flow of resources—financial, knowledge-based and ideational—that could otherwise be harnessed for broader

developmental benefits in the region.

Newly established CERS faces significant challenges in forming a cohesive political and economic community. These challenges are compounded by exclusive identity discourses and political practices that obstruct integration efforts. The Greater Hadiya project, alongside the Gurage nationalists' limited engagement with neighbouring groups and the broader southern region, hamper progress toward delivering public goods.

Thus far in Hosanna, the tension and contestations have rarely escalated into violence, which makes it an unusual case in the Ethiopian context. The abundance of capital sent from South Africa as remittances invigorated urban land sales and created economic opportunities that ease some of the pressures that can fuel conflict. In other parts of the country, political interventions rather than economic trends have driven urban re-engineering and gentrification, which has frequently escalated contestations over land and resources into conflict. State-backed development projects and other land grabs have also contributed to outbreaks of violence.

Hosanna's relatively peaceful dynamics, despite the confrontations over public spaces among faith communities and political clash over the choice of a regional capital, indicate that routes to de-escalation that would be inaccessible in the wake of violence may remain open in Hosanna. Despite these obstacles, the diverse peoples of CERS have a shared history and social ties that offer a foundation for unity. The ongoing contestation over the location of the regional capital underscores the need to overcome divisive sentiments and foster a collective sense of purpose. To unlock the region's potential, it is crucial to shift focus from narrow, enclave-centred development to a more collaborative approach that emphasizes regional cooperation and shared resources.

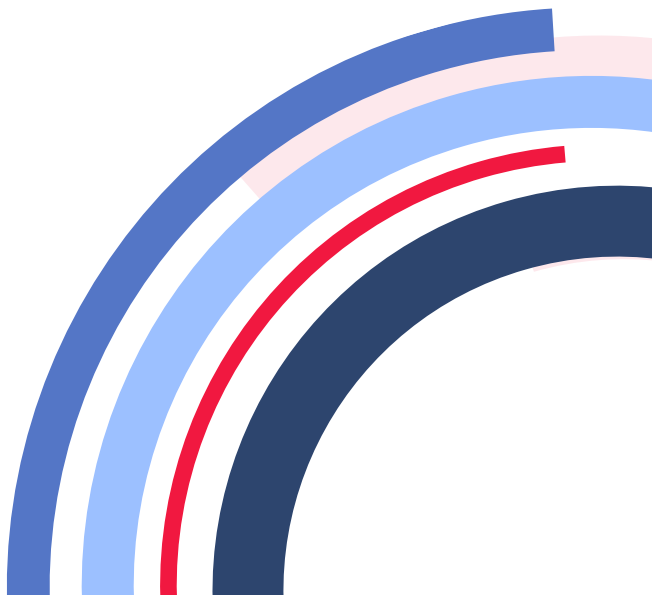
This analysis of urbanization and contestation in Hosanna offers policy insights that are applicable across Ethiopia, particularly in areas prone to conflict. Addressing historical imbalances through local economic mechanisms, rather than top-down political measures, will promote sustainable development and help avoid the discriminatory practices that can lead to violent confrontations between groups. To foster a more peaceful and equitable environment in and around Hosanna, in CERS and within Hadiya society, this study has several recommendations:

- **ETHIOPIA NEEDS URBAN AND PERI-URBAN GROWTH STRATEGIES TAILORED TO SPECIFIC LOCATIONS:** To address the unplanned expansion of Hosanna into Lemo woreda and the associated challenges, inclusive development approaches such as land readjustment⁷⁷ are essential. This requires negotiated settlements between the Hosanna town and Lemo woreda administrations, alongside consultation with farmers

77 'Participatory and inclusive land readjustment', UN-Habitat. Accessed 25 October 2024, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/1407237675wprm_Land%20Readjustments.pdf.

affected by urbanization. The Directorate for Land Administration and Use under the federal Ministry of Agriculture should produce a strategy to reform the chaotic peri-urban development occurring in Hosanna and elsewhere. Wachemo University is well-placed to revive and spearhead implementation of the Hosanna Integrated Urban Development Project.

- **ENHANCE THE LOCAL INVESTMENT CLIMATE:** Hadiya zonal government should incentivize investment away from property and towards more productive sectors. Given the zone's circumstances, the local administration should increase public investment in infrastructure and social services, as well introduce incentive packages to attract private investment.
- **PROMOTE REGIONAL SOCIAL COHESION:** The CERS government should work to enhance social cohesion among its diverse population to ease the elite friction. This involves strategic planning to identify and articulate shared interests and priorities. The regional leadership should engage a broad range of stakeholders in this process. Additionally, given the potential for leveraging remittances, CERS should develop a remittances investment policy as part of a development strategy focused on agrarian transformation and small-scale industrialization.
- **DEVELOP INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE AND SOCIAL POLICIES:** Governance in Hosanna, the Hadiya zone and CERS should be based on principles of diversity and pluralism. New regulatory frameworks should ensure equitable access to land and other essential resources for all communities, including religious ones.



GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

<i>Bajaj</i>	motor trike
<i>bizeha ketema</i>	(<i>Amharic</i>) multi-city approach
CERS	Central Ethiopia Regional State
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
Gerad	(<i>Hadiyyisa</i>) king
<i>Hadiyyi Nafara</i>	(<i>Hadiyyisa</i>) lung of Hadiya; coll. Breathing space
<i>hidrow</i>	(<i>Hadiyyisa</i>) traditional oath system
HIP	Hosanna Integrated Plan
HNDO	Hadiya National Democratic Organization
<i>Irrecha</i>	(<i>Afaan Oromo</i>) traditional Oromo new year thanksgiving ceremony
<i>ketema</i>	(<i>Amharic</i>) garrison
Masqala	(<i>Hadiyyissa</i>) The discovery of the True Cross
Melkam Wetat	(<i>Amharic</i>) excellent youth
SERS	South Ethiopia Regional State
SIM	Sudan Interior Mission
SNNPRs	Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State
SWERS	South West Ethiopia Regional State
<i>woreda</i>	(<i>Amharic</i>) third-level administrative division
<i>Yahude</i>	(<i>Hadiyyisa</i>) traditional Hadiya new year thanksgiving ceremony



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