

Back & Forth – Changes in the Agency of Women in Maale, Southern Ethiopia

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Ethiopia has never been colonized by a European Colonial Power, still gender relations have changed during the course of the last centuries due to several factors, i.e. the conversion to Protestant Christianity and the modern Ethiopian Nation State, which both aim at achieving a gender order according to western norms.

In my paper I would like to focus on the transformation of Maale women's agency, which is brought about by the change in gender relations. Within the traditional ritual system of the Maale society women were feared for their impurity and respected for their procreative powers. Furthermore their life was structured by a certain sequence of rituals. Today many Maale women follow the western normative gender order instead of adhering to their own traditional ritual order. Thereby they lose the power that had been ascribed to them as well as their orientation in life that was formerly assured by a strict sequence of live cycle rituals. Thus, one could conclude that the new lifestyle promoted by the Protestant churches as well as Ethiopian government policies (especially the announcement of so-called *Traditional Harmful Practices*) does not always endorse an increase of Maale women's agency, but is partly a step backwards concerning the empowerment of women, who have never been powerless.