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Initiation of Healers in Ethiopia: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to see how healers are initiated in Ethiopia. The paper also describes the position of traditional healers in the current situation of Ethiopia.

It is found out that most of spiritual healers believed that they are selected by divine power or spirit. The selections are manifested by a single or a combination of ways namely: through dream, escaping mortal accident, and miraculous healing from chronic illnesses. However, secular healers got the initiation through apprenticeship. It is noted that in many cases »spirit selected healers« could also undergo apprenticeship.

Introduction

This article primarily deals with the initiation of healers in Ethiopia. In order to give vivid elaboration of the recruitment methods, life histories of 2 known healers in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, are employed as case studies. The data were collected primarily in Addis Ababa from June 1997 to January 1998 by employing quasi-participant observation and interview.

When we look at the literature regarding the indigenous medicine of Ethiopia relatively speaking, it is only the Amhara traditional medicine that is studied¹⁻⁵. Ethiopia is a country of many diverse cultures that reflect the presence of many tribes and ethnic groups. Because of cul-

tural diffusion among these diversified population groups the indigenous medicine has also been undergoing changes and blending. Today, as the result of these close interactions and blending of cultures and long aged domination of Amhara culture there is a trend of considering the Amhara traditional medicine as an »Ethiopian traditional medicine«⁶. Surprisingly enough, there is a considerable similarity of indigenous medical practices among various cultural groups in the country.

The best example of this similarity is the heavy emphasis on super natural power in all-diverse cultural groups⁷. Most of the time the indigenous medical practices of all these diverse cultural groups put heavy emphasis on supernat-

ural forces particularly when they deal with causation, diagnosis and therapy of illnesses.

As I stated, this similarity is the result of diffusion of cultures where the belief system is one element. So, in the current Ethiopia particularly in big cities like Addis Ababa where there is a conglomeration of many ethnic groups one can see the interchanging and blending of belief and healing systems among these population groups. The initiation of healers therefore, shows similarity despite the presence of many linguistic groups as stated above, of course, formatted and influenced by Amhara pattern of healers' initiation*. Most of the time a healer could be initiated not only with one method but also by a combination of various recruiting methods, which I will explain in this article. Therefore, case histories of healers that I am going to discuss could involve various forms of recruitment.

Recruiting Traditional Healers

According to Eliade⁸ shamans in Central and North East Asia are recruited in two major ways: by heredity and, through spontaneous vocation, that is, »election« or »call«. Other than these two major methods there are also minor ones such as becoming a shaman through one's free will and by appointment of a clan. But as⁹ Eliade puts it, shamans of the latter type lack positive sanction of the society compared to the first two. As Prinz¹⁰ stated healers are recruited for healing in the process which anthropologists call »initiation«. This process incorporates shamanic elements that Prinz¹⁰ summarized

it as »dreams of vocation, apprenticeship, accompanying transcendental entity, journey to the world beyond, change of personality, and death and rebirth«. For him, the 'zinitiation' which encompasses the aforesaid shamanic elements make African (Azande) healers shamans. I also argue that such definition entitles Ethiopian spiritual healers, shamans. In the following sections I concentrate only in explaining these shamanic elements by employing case histories of known healers in Addis Ababa.

There are two major ways of recruiting traditional healers in Ethiopia. These are: divine selection and apprenticeship. These two methods are not mutually exclusive. Healers who claimed themselves to be »elected« have also passed in the long way of apprenticeship. Similarly, even healers who could be categorized as secular healers substantiate their healing practice by claiming of having supernatural support.

Although various researchers^{1,6} classified traditional healers in Ethiopia in various ways, I have categorized them in to two broad categories: secular and spiritual healers. However most of the time there is overlapping of healing activities. Secular healers can also employ spiritual healing practices, which in other sense is recognized as spiritual healing, and vice versa. So, the most difficult part in studying healers in Ethiopia is this overlapping of healing practices.

Divine Selection

Divine selection takes various forms such as escaping from accident, strange

* This gross identification of the Ethiopian traditional medical system with Amhara ethnic group, is largely influenced by the socio-economic and political domination of this ethnic group in the past. Furthermore, the literary tradition of this ethnic group coupled with its association with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church have affirmed its top rank position when we speak of the Ethiopian traditional medical system. For instance, the Amhara domination of traditional medicine is clearly seen in Addis Ababa. As I explained elsewhere in this article, most of the specializations of traditional medicine in Addis Ababa are formatted on Amhara traditional medicine. In addition to other minor factors, this might be the result of the numerical superiority of the Amhara ethnic group in Addis Ababa.

dream in which the dreamer undergoes and is then instructed to be a healer¹¹, and recovering from illness miraculously¹². According to Eliade⁸ among the Southern Siberia people of Buryat the future shaman is selected by having an accident. This includes striking him with lightning, or stones believed to come from the sky.

One of the known healers in Ethiopia who claimed to be »elected« in this way (escaping from accident) is healer Mamo Haile. He is just over 80 years old and lives in Addis Ababa. He was born in 1918 at the place called Fatagar, Bulga Awraja, Amhara Region. The healer has five sisters. Four of them are still alive and one has died. He has no brother, only cousins. He is married and his wife is still alive. He has only one son who is currently living in Greece. He has no formal or secular education as such however; he has studied the traditional church (Coptic) education for many years during his childhood and young age. He got this church education in his native province and studied under a certain renowned virgin hermit who had come from Jerusalem. Healer Mamo came to Addis Ababa with his father who had been employed in the palace as telephone operator. The healer is a follower of Orthodox Church and belongs to the Amhara ethnic group. During the anti-Italian patriotic war (1929–33) he learned various traditional medicines. He began with lessons about treating the small pox through inoculation and then how to make circumcision. The healer said that during the Italian invasion the patriots were using medicinal plants like dadaho (*Euclea schimperii?*) and kitkita (*Dodonaea viscosa?*) for treating wounded patriots. At that period he claimed that he was grinding the me-

dicinal plants with a stone so that others could not know it* and then apply it for treating bomb and bullet wounds. He claims that as a result he had become so famous in the patriots camp that whenever there was such kind of problems people were saying »*yachin lij tiru*« (lit. »Call that young boy«). During the patriotic war he also learned from other *debtera* (learned men of the Coptic Church of Ethiopia) treating wounds by using herbals.

Healer Mamo considered himself elected by supernatural power when he escaped an accident during the patriotic struggle. He has convinced himself that he had narrowly escaped death because of divine grace and protection. He said that during the patriotic struggle (1929–33), in one bloody battle only fifteen people including him survived the onslaught of the Italians which claimed the lives of four hundred other patriots. So, he got the impression that he has got divine protection. Since then he said, »I don't believe that I would die not only in the past but also in the future«. He considered that it was a miracle for him to survive from such massacre and now believed that he has a divine protection. He further claimed that during the time of the Italian invasion even bullets were not wounding him because of his special divine protection.

As I stated earlier, the other form of initiation of healers in divine selection is through dreams. Healer Mamo reaffirmed his divine selection by the various dreams he underwent. He said that in his frequent dreams Jesus and many angels such as *Gabriel* and *Michael* have been coming to him. He claimed that whenever he puts »*Meshafe Raey*« (the »Book of

* Most healers in Ethiopia hide their knowledge regarding the collection, processing and administering of medicinal plants from the public, patients and other healers. This secrecy is typical feature of healers in the country. Regarding herbal medicine of Ethiopia see Teshome-Bahire 1999:28–32.

Revelation«), or »*Meshafe Yoseph*«, (the »Book of Joseph«) near his bed, whatever dream he dreams would later prove as accurate. »I put a paper and pencil near me and in the morning I write everything before it is forgotten«, he claimed. He said that he has a special book to translate all his dreams. In all my interviews with him the healer was emphasizing his Christian faith though he is known in Addis Ababa for his divination services. In fact, most of the spiritual healers in Ethiopia desperately attempt to associate their healing power with a spirit that is accepted by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in order to avoid persecution. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the single largest Christian church in the country, condemns every kind of spirit outside the realm of its teaching, as Satanic. Such situation made spiritual healers, particularly those who are associated with pre-Christian beliefs of spirits such as *zar*, to officially profess that their healing power is from God and other spirits recognized by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Thus even *zar* possessed healers make such kind of claims officially but continue their allegiance to the other type of spirits at convenient times and places. The church does not officially recognize the existence of *zar* spirits¹³. As a result they are grossly condemned as *ganels* (Satanic) and hence liable to be exorcised in the church. Furthermore, the Ethiopian Coptic Church does not recognize traditional healing other than its own which involves exorcism with *tabal* (holy water) and prayer.

Becoming a healer after recovering from acute illness is another form of divine selection and initiation. When a person is healed from severe illness he himself becomes a healer in return for his recovery¹¹. One of the healers in Addis Ababa who believed that he was elected

in this form is Healer Tekle Haile Gabriel. He lives and works in *Woreda* 10; *Kebele* 15, in the neighborhood that is commonly called *Kechene*. He was born in *Menz*, Northern *Shoa* province of the *Amhara* region and he is 61 years old. Both his father and mother have passed away. He has a sister and a brother. Ethnically he is an *Amhara*. He has no formal or secular education but studied only church education. By religion he is an Orthodox Christian. He has two sons and both are working with him as his assistants. The healer migrated to Addis Ababa while he was 31 years old. He had been married in his native land even before his migration to Addis Ababa. He said that while he was a boy he was suffering from severe eye disease while blood and pus were constantly flowing from his nose. Repeatedly he saw how to heal people in his dream and thereafter he was healed miraculously. Since then he started treating patients. Before coming to Addis Ababa he was curing many sick people from lowland areas of neighboring regions like *Wollo* who were suffering from wounds, like *chife* (eczema?). While he was a young he was also preparing amulets. Like healer Mamo, he also connected the source of his healing power to a spirit through dream. He claimed that he learned about healing techniques and medicinal plants in his dreams. After coming to Addis Ababa he tried to get a license from the Ministry of Health. But he was not successful because the Ministry of Health instructed him to apply to the Municipality of Addis Ababa, which he at first did but again rejected. During the time of *Derg* (1974–1991)* he repeatedly applied but was again rejected. In all these cases he secretly performed healing practices. During the time of *Derg* he was imprisoned for six months for illegal tra-

* A Marxist Military Government of Ethiopia

ditional medical practices in *Maekelawi*, (»Central«) prison. The Marxist Military government was harassing healers by branding them as »*abay tenquay*« (lit. »false seers«). According to his story the Ministry of Health was vehemently opposing him until he successfully cured a woman who had a son in the Ministry of Health (who was an important official at the Ministry). And she appealed his case on his behalf to her son. This opportunity enabled him to get a temporary working permission from the Ministry of Health. But later on during the time of EPRDF (a political group which formed a new government in 1991) he and other healers were allowed to form an association and through the association he got a license from the Ministry of Health. Currently he is the vice-chairman of the healers association. At present he claims that he treats various kinds of mortal diseases including cancer in addition to minor treatments of wounds and bone fractures. He also treats hemorrhoids, which appears on anus.

This form of divine selection, becoming a healer after being ritually healed from chronic illness, is the most common recruitment method of healers in Ethiopia. Spirit possession which is commonly known, as *zar* in Ethiopia is a typical example of this type of initiation. In order to elaborate it I will concentrate on one group of spiritual healers, *balazaroch*⁽³⁾, who are always taught to be selected by a supernatural power or spirit.

Although Eliade⁸ attempted to differentiate between a shaman and a »possessed« person, the first as »controller of spirit«, and the later as the one »controlled by spirit«, in the Ethiopian case this distinction is rarely applicable. Because *zar* possessed people become healers and shamans in the latter or final stage of initiation particularly if the possessing spirit is very strong and influences other less powerful spirits. In a

plain statement, those individuals who are possessed by powerful spirits (it can be one or many) can gradually transform themselves as shamans or *awakiy balazar* (lit. »knowledgeable *zar* master«) if the relationship between the »possessor«, (in this case *zar* spirit), and the »possessed« has been peaceful. In this manner after reaching this stage and assuming such status other *zar* afflicted individuals and other patients come to consult the *awakiy balazar* for healing and divination respectively. As Lewis¹⁴ argued »possession is believed to be both involuntary (or uncontrolled), and voluntary (or controlled).« Those who practice controlled possession, »mastering' spirits, are in the Arctic context known as 'ššamans'. In fact, even Eliade⁸ himself has admitted that a spirit could possess shamans though he considered it as a rare instance.

Symptoms of Selection

Possession by *zar* is always preceded by unexplainable illnesses that could be considered as symptoms of »selection«. These illnesses could be both psychological and somatic. The first includes epilepsy, depression and hysteria, while the latter includes headache, fever, rheumatic complaints, stomach pain, swooning, and sleeplessness. The symptoms are common for both sexes, male and female. These symptoms of the *zar* possession are known collectively as *kureyna* in Amharic. Since these symptoms are indicators of possession by *zar* spirit, the customary reaction is consulting *awakiy balazar*^{1,4,15}.

Diagnosis and therapy of possession

One of the criteria of being a shaman¹⁰ is 'accompanying transcendental entity'. Eliade⁸ also says, »the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld«.

This condition can be clearly seen in the healing ceremony of zar possession.

As I stated, when a person shows those symptoms that are normally associated with zar then he would be taken to a healer or diviner called awakiy balazar. Normally the awakiy balazar has his own group of balazaroch (lit. »zar possessed«). This group which is called hadra (in Amharic) consists of a number of balazaroch who regularly meet for the same purpose. When a new client comes the first phase is identifying the zar who possessed the individual¹.

Information like the sex, age and religion of the zar would be known following the conversation with the new zar. In order to communicate with the new zar, the awakiy balazar would be mounted by his zar and undergoes in a trance. The awakiy balazar is mounted by many zaroch (a plural of zar) which are very powerful and influential in their rank and could influence the zaroch of the other members of the hadra (a group of zar possessed people who regularly meet) who are mostly one or two, and are less influential and weak. That is why the zar of awakiy balazar influence the less influential zar to speak out their demands. Sometimes the new zar may not be communicative and hence the patient would stay in the house of the awakiy balazar for a longer period of time. The patient would be given chat (*Catha edulis*) and follows regulated courses of diet until his zar is socialized and becomes communicative. So, in this manner the awakiy balazar with the help of his zar asks the new zar to state his demands that normally would be regular and periodic gifts such as perfumes, clothes, and jewelry. The dialogue is in zar argot since all the time they have their own slang. Once the new zar is known and his demands are met, the symptoms disappear, and the patient will become a regular member of the hadra, or coterie^{1,16}. In such way the

possessed individuals maintain long term relations with their spirits. The therapy given by the awakiy balazar is not curing, but socializing or taming the new zar. He temporarily removes the symptoms but not the zar. Zar spirits are believed to cause ailments, particularly when individuals disappoint the zar by not fulfilling the above mentioned demands of the zar obligations.

In addition to fellow members of the hadra the awakiy balazar gives divinatory services to those individuals who are not members of his hadra.

Apprenticeship

The second major method of recruiting traditional healers (mostly the secular healers) in Ethiopia is apprenticeship. This is learning deliberately from the established practitioners¹⁷. The apprenticeship is a very long process. It starts when those who would be healers are young. A boy, usually a son or very close kinsman of the healer, starts his training by accompanying the master healer. Even most of the time after mastering the healing techniques after a long process the trainee cannot practice it on his own until his mentor has moved to another place and hence out of reach, has retired and stopped his healing practice, or has died¹.

Healer Mamo also learned healing through apprenticeship. He had studied under three mentors at different times and places. His first mentor during his childhood was a virgin monk who came from Jerusalem and who knew medicinal plants. The second mentor of Mamo was the father of his Christian father (»yechristna abate abat«). Mamo said that among all his mentors (i.e. the virgin hermit, debtera) the most knowledgeable one was the father of his Christian father. He said that although this mentor was illiterate (he meant church and secular education) he knew many medicinal plants and herbs. Mamo has also studied in the

form of apprenticeship from experienced debtera (who are always associated with traditional medicine in Ethiopia particularly with witchcraft, sorcery and divinations) during his childhood and young age.

Initiation, as Eliade⁸ stated, is usually private and only sometimes public. In Ethiopia the initiation of healers is mostly private and even conducted in a secret way. As I explained elsewhere in this article the strong condemnation of spiritual healing and zar possession by the government and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church made the ever-private initiation of healers even more hidden and underground activity.

Rituals or ceremonies that culminate the initiation process can be public and private. Actually, for Eliade⁸ the public ritual or ceremony is nothing else but a confirmation of the secret private initiation that already took place through the methods such as dreams and sickness. In the case of the Ethiopian healers because of the age long persecutions the initiation ceremonies are held privately.

Discussion

At present time almost all traditional healers (both spiritual and secular) in Addis Ababa officially claim and call themselves herbalists. This is the result of the persecution of spiritual healers during the Marxist regime as *abay tenquay*. (Lit. »false seers«). Unfortunately, however, this condition of disguising oneself as herbalist continued even after the fall of the Marxist government because of various protracted reasons.

The most important problem for healers (particularly spiritual healers) is getting a license to practice healing. Because of the effect of the negative stereotype the Ministry of Health has not been willing to grant them a working license. But recently, through the aid of Bio-Diversity

Institute, the healers after getting a membership status in the healers association manage themselves to get a license. However, the granting of a license is discriminate. That is, only herbalists who use plants and herbs are allowed to get a license. This led to the artificial transformation of a segment of healers (spiritual healers) to a herbalists' rank for the sake of getting a working license.

After the formation of a new government in 1991, the Bio-Diversity Institute which is governed by the Ministry of Agriculture started to assist healers particularly the ones who deal with plants in order to get cooperation of the healers in this area, that is, in identifying and preserving of plants and herbs in the country which is the main goal of the Institute. In order to achieve this goal the Institute has given an office to the Association of Traditional Healers in its compound. The members of this association are also entitled to get a working license to practice healing by using herbal medicine. This paved a golden opportunity for all healers including spiritual healers of getting a license and is able to practice the healing profession. So, all types of healers including spiritual healers present themselves as herbalists at least nominally in order to get the license. It is very common to see in Addis Ababa these days signposts advertising the healing knowledge of the herbalists and efficacy of the herbal medicine. For a country where healers had been persecuted this is a good beginning. Despite this outward expression and assuming oneself as a herbalist still secretly and at night time most of the healers who claim themselves herbalists perform spiritual healing, sorcery and witchcraft.

Conclusion

Most of the literature discussing Ethiopian traditional medicine has taken var-

ious types of traditional practitioners as one and the same. Thus herbalists, diviners, bonesetters, midwives, e.t.c were identified and categorized in a uniform manner. However, such gross and indiscriminate generalizations should be analyzed carefully in order to prevent misconceptions.

It is true that in many cases categorizing healers in line with their specialization is difficult because of the absence of clear-cut demarcations in their healing activities. I have found out that most of traditional healers practice multiple undertakings. Hence a certain healer could be bonesetter, herbalist and diviner at the same time. I can give two probable explanations for this phenomenon. Healers do not confine themselves with their own specific profession or undertaking probably because of the increasing need of the society. The coverage of modern medicine in Ethiopia is one of the poorest in the world. The cost of modern medical care is very high and unaffordable to the major-

ity of the people. Second, as I stated elsewhere in this article the various forms of harassment and persecutions against spiritual healers forced them to join the herbalist group (at least nominally). Therefore the demarcation line between herbalists and spiritual healers in Ethiopia appears very thin. And hence, categorizing healers along their undertakings seemed arbitrary. Usually, however, herbalists are concerned with herbs and plants while spiritual healers also perform divination magic, prayers and rituals.

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INICIJACIJA IS CJELITELJA U ETIOPIJI: STUDIJA SLUČAJA

S A Ž E T A K

Cilj ove studije je uvidjeti kako se iscjelitelji iniciraju u Etiopiji. Rad, također, opisuje položaj tradicionalnih iscjelitelja u suvremenoj Etiopiji. Utvrđeno je da većina duhovnih iscjelitelja vjeruje da ih je odabrala božanska moć ili duh. Odabir se manifestira jednim ili kombiacijom načina: putem sna, izbjegnuća smrti i čudotvornim iscjeljenjem od kronične bolesti. Svjetovni iscjelitelji, također, bivaju inicirani učeći od autoriteta. Zabilježeno je da se u mnogim slučajevima iscjelitelji koje je odabrao duh, podvrgavaju i učenju.