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## *Sūfism and Syncretism in North-Eastern Šäwa*

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Abbebe Kifleyesus\*

Sūfism in north-eastern Šäwa, as in Sunni Islam elsewhere, is a mystical movement that emphasises the intermediary role of holy men or saints and is aimed at gaining a closer connection to and higher knowledge of Allāh by its male adherents who perform rituals collectively in brotherhoods or fraternities. Moreover, the *shari'ā*-minded Islam is concerned primarily with the well being of the Islamic body politic while Sūfism in the abstract represents concerns that are typical of the social and spiritual life of the individual. Yet the various manifestations of Sūfism are not best seen as an alternative to *shari'ā*-minded Islam. Rather mysticism shrouded in syncretism is understood as an intense personal complement to the more formal Islamic doctrines (ABBEBE KIFLEYESUS 1995:31). It appeals to the desire of the pious for withdrawal from the world in order to achieve higher forms of religious knowledge and mystical union with Allāh through common *ḍikr* or meditative recitations or prayers. It is the piety, healing ability, and perceived power of holy men and saints to make miracles that makes saint worship appealing to peasant commoners (DESPLAT 2005:498).

North-eastern Šäwa, as Berhanu Gebeyehu (1998:8) shows for Wällo and Solomon Getahun (1997:5-12) does the same with Gondar of the past and present, is a religiously and culturally plural polity whose underlying local cultural commonalities allowed the exchange, accommodation, and tolerance of diverse traditions and belief systems. These spiritual traditions have always had a space for non-Muslim religious influences including zar cults and exorcist practices whose festering spirits are treated by holy men in these rural retreats. Saint veneration and the cult of saints (*bā awliyā māmāēān*) is thus, in this sense, at present central to the religious life of Muslim Ethiopians in north-eastern Šäwa. It includes prescribed prayers or recitations (*du'ā*) performed ceremonially but always individually or communally (*ḥādrāḥ*), involves several sermons (*kbuṭbā*) pertaining to Qur'ānic traditions, and often, as Ishihara (2010:253) shows for western Oromia, entails syncretic emanations, which together may induce exorcist experiences and altered states of consciousness, to use the phrase of Bourguignon (1973:29), among the disciplined performers. These spiritual exercises feature a Sūfi ritual (*ḍikr*) which, as Taristani (2005:158-159, 2008:183) shows using a Harari field experience, combines bodily movements with chants and drum beats aimed at inducing a state of mind that is

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both mystic and syncretic. Thus, the gap between the *ulamā* and the *awliyā* is narrower than what is normally presented in recent studies.

In north-eastern Šäwa, the oral literature involving litanies and panegyric or didactic verses or poems called *mānżumat* is replete with references to local and foreign Sūfi saints and their loci of shrines including those of Abbayä Géta (*Soṭän*), *shayh* Muhammad Adem (*Tač Mätäqläya*), Emmayyā Radiya (*Lay Mätäqläya*), *shayh* Jamil (Qoraré), *shayh* Muhammad Amin or *Toriqa* (Embokarra), *shayh* Āli Däwwé (Aliyyu Amba), Faqi Ahmed (‘Abdrasul), Emmākāsumé (Dinki), *shayh* Nur Hussen (Cänno), *sayyəd* Āli (Kher Amba), *Gäbäroč yyā* or *shayh* Yusuf (Gäbäroč), *shayh* Yəmam (Gussa) and *shayh* Swadiq (Wəsiso/Rasa) and are yearly visited by several thousand Muslim and non-Muslim pilgrims from far and near (ABBEBE KIFLEYESUS 2006:181-182). However, among many northern Šäwa Muslim fundamentalists, Sūfism is an untolerated target of extreme suspicion and considered as a violation of Islamic tradition and a kind of syncretic and heretic nounces (*bid’ā*). But there are also those who belong to no saint cults and yet tolerate their practices as in Gäläbunna and Gussa surroundings. The latter, as depicted in the expression *wəqabén lämasaggäs gussa mälläsmälläs*, is well known for exorcising spirits during saintly shrine visitations. Thus the kind of Islam assumed in north-eastern Šäwa is both orthodox and popular in context.

### Ethnography of the Sūfi Shrines

Like most other Sūfi shrines and Islamic teaching sites in Ethiopia, the ones in north-eastern Šäwa are located on a summit of mountain ranges reached through strenuous walks. These Sūfi shrines are usually found near springs and groves and are surrounded by a fence and sometimes enclosed by low walls or other types of enclosures that are considered as ritually clean and sacred. Such saintly shrines are most of the time white washed and rock-domed structures constructed of dressed stone, and as monumental edifices frequently rise high from fields in order to signal a stopping place for itinerants. Again typical of other similar Sūfi shrines throughout northern Ethiopia, they have a dome where the remains of the saint rest, a place of residence for the *khalifā* or custodian of the shrine, and a mosque. Almost all of them are remote rural retreats far away from noisy town roads and markets, and this makes them ideal places for meditation and religious education. They are by and large founded by family lineage members (*silsila*); they annually attract several thousand pilgrims from both Šäwa and Wällo and beyond, serve as the principal Sūfi sites for higher Islamic learning and training, and the initiation of individuals into a mystical order, and act as special spaces for collective religious experience and social interaction. In this respect, saint worship or the cult of saints serves as focal points of Islamic localism and as centres of mysticism and syncretism.

Such Sūfi sanctuaries have caretakers (*khalifā*) to take charge of visitors and to collect prestations and offerings. The keeper of the shrine received pilgrims’ gifts in cash or in kind as an expression of humility and in search of the saint’s blessings (*barakā*) and miraculous manifestations (*karamāt*). They also organise yearly shrine visits, accommodate pilgrims in lodges, and distribute foods for guests. The *khalifā*, usually a descendant of the Sūfi saint, as a guardian of the shrine also takes care of those who

come for instruction (HUSSEIN AHMED 1988:98). The fact that these Sūfi shrines were relatively within each others' reach allowed a regional network and affinal relations between saintly families and their descendants or successors, and students or disciples. In these centres, pilgrims congregate in order to celebrate the *mawlid* or birth of the Prophet Muhammad and offer votive sacrifices (*nazri*) within the premises of the shrines. Most of the time, pilgrims come on foot, as part of a vow for fulfilled wishes, while few travel using mules but for those who come from distant lands journeys, usually considered religious experiences, may take up to two days. The large majority of pilgrims arrived two or three days before the commencement of the momentous occasion and with patience pitched in place temporary shelters and tents in the open space surrounding the shrine.

In these same surroundings, itinerant petty traders set stalls to sell ceremonial necessities such as coffee, *ṣat* (*Catba edulis* or *qât* in Arabic), sugar, matches, incense, perfumes, candles and other daily needs. Most of the pilgrims are peasant cultivators and craft workers including weavers and basket makers, rural itinerant students, urban traders and merchants as well as unemployed individuals, civil servants, women housewives, a small but growing number of Christians from all walks of life, some beggars and physically handicapped persons who perform the pilgrimage to primarily partake in the immediate redistribution of food and to collect charity. Although only men are active participants of the cults of saints, women provide the audiences for ritual and figure prominently in the backgrounds. In fact, more women than men seek out the blessings (*barakā*) of the Sūfi sanctuaries. Women seek the intercession of saintly power in order to break the burden of barrenness and have children or to they or other family members recover from festering illnesses while men usually look for success in business and restoration of health. Moreover, because they are barred from participating in formal mosque prayers, women find special meaning in their relationship with the aura and charisma of the *awliyā*. That is perhaps why many women and their children often pass the time at the local shrines socialising with others. In this respect, pilgrimage is a both a religious journey or movement and entertainment.

On arrival at the shrine, pilgrims circumbolate the shrine of the Sūfi saint three times, prostrate at the entrance of the tomb of the saint, kiss the walls of the dome, pray and meditate, and many press bits of butter or honey, pieces of cloth or beads and pebbles on the walls of the chamber to signify special pleas to the saint. This act represents the most intimate and emotionally charged moment of the entire event in which pilgrims made supplications in search of the saint's intercession and blessings (*barakā*). The possessed, the mentally deranged and most emotionally involved devotees shouted and fell in some sort of trance dance until taken care of by their own companions and shrine attendants. This is an indication that shrines also accommodate manifestations of syncretism and exorcism in which the possessed person is freed from the evil spirit by the invisible power of the dead or living saint (ABEBE KIFLEYESUS 2010:714).

Pilgrims normally take along their food that they may share with fellow shrine visitors as part of the function of *sadaqā* during religious rituals. On the eve of the event, a large number of oxen or sheep or goats, depending on the degree of importance of the shrine, brought by those who are participating in the pilgrimage (*ziyarāh*) are

slaughtered separately for Muslims and Christians and the meat is shared accordingly by all those present in the occasion because for the former it is the very act of slaughtering that marks the distinction between *ḥarām* and *ḥalāl* (FICQUET 2006:40). During successive days, pilgrims who happen to be family members, friends, companions and acquaintances formed small circles and earnestly took part in the collective worship through the conspicuous consumption of cat and the recitation of litanies in Amharic or '*ajamī*', as observed by Pankhurst (1994a: 257) in Wällo, in honour of the local saint. As the days progressed, pilgrims become frenzy with ecstasy and are absorbed fully by the act of utter devotion and meditation in order to achieve a mystical path to collective salvation. In the meantime, peasants in the surroundings of the saintly shrines stopped agricultural engagements and instead contributed labour that facilitated the festive rituals of the annual occasion.

*Mänzumā* chants that extol or glorify the virtues of local saints in the form of recollection of memorised lines accompanied by musical intonations, the outburst sounds of the overzealous pilgrims, the fragrance of incense and other aromatics, and the odour of perfumes gave a special aura to the surroundings of the shrine. The harmony between bodily movements and chanting of these praise-lyrics and songs induces the highest stage of spiritual elation and excitement in the most devoted pilgrims. The infinity of time and space allowed a focus on the unfolding of the ceremonious events and in the meantime barefoot pilgrims moved back and forth to either as first time visitors make vows to return with gifts if wishes are fulfilled or make vows to saints based on needs and desires (*baja*), give tokens (*ḡabātā*) and gifts (*ḥādiyyā*) in the name of shrine sites (*dāriḥ*), take errands, fetch items or to simply salute fellow pilgrimage participants in these sacred grounds. In Sūfi sanctuaries, pilgrims thus find a means of worship in an ambience in which they enjoy a feeling of friendship not available in any form of fellowship.

Such Sūfi physical locus of pilgrimages and the shrines of dead saints are places for various spiritual and social activities. They are, as observed earlier, also a scene for various miraculous manifestations, and a setting for the telling of stories describing these occurrences. Northern Šāwa saintly shrines as Islamic hubs thus attract large numbers of pilgrims including Christians, provide a platform to perform mystical blessings and miracles, and inherently serve the major needs for Muslim religious activity and sanctity. The Sūfi *zāwiyā* which normally is found in the surroundings of the shrine and which in some cases can have several compartments is a place for education, social entertainment and recreation through *ḍikr* circles and *mawlid* recitations. It is usually a settlement around the home of the saint's descendant or successor (*ḵbaltifā*) where religious students and devotees live, and where people from all walks of life come on pilgrimage on certain days of the year in order to pay respects, pray, receive blessings or advices or still to ask favours.

Sometime *zawāyā* become so big that they even consist of classrooms, libraries, dormitories, kitchens, repositories, granaries and a mosque. In deed while some as spiritual space and places of religious learning draw large crowds, others are small study spaces for devote followers. But the prestige of all depends on the popularity of the

quality of their religious education or most importantly, on the efficiency in answering or fulfilling the requests or wishes of pilgrims. Moreover, a *zāwiya* may due to the strength of a *shayḥ* possess a strong influence and act as an intercessor and mediator in contentions and conflicts among the faithful and between the state and its subjects. As in Wəsiso/Rasa, they can also become so influential that they attract donations and gifts (*waqf*) from followers, devotees, and well wishers who visit for purposes of spiritual instruction, moral guidance and consolation. Several of these Sūfi shrines are also supported by the surrounding peasants who also may take turn to repair fences and engage in various daily tasks.

Sūfi shrines in north-eastern Šāwa provide shelter for the homeless and food for the penniless and, through their *zāwiyyā* or *khalawā*, they functioned as popular instructional institutions for Qur’ānic and post Qur’ānic education bearing the stamp of Sūfis and mystics. In other words, Sūfi shrines contributed a great deal to the development of literacy and scholarship not only as retreats for spiritual insights and reflections and as venues for religious gatherings but also as educational establishments. It is true that they are places for rituals and popular festivals but in addition to piety and sanctity they also defended orthodoxy by offering standard Islamic education to the mass of pilgrims or ordinary peasant folks in simple non dogmatic but dramatic terms in order to fill the hearts and minds of the pious gatherings with a strong sense of devotion to the basic tenets of Islam. In turn, pilgrims express deep feelings of brotherhood, exchange information concerning the founder Sūfi saint, and create occasions for sharing saints’ legends.

Most shrines have separate quarters for men and women, houses for students and teachers, and reception and ritual halls for *ziyārāb* participants. However, since Sūfi shrines are open to any pilgrim, they manage to bring together Sūfi followers and thus break socioeconomic differences through the creation of spiritual bonds. More importantly, Sūfi shrines of northeastern Šāwa offered an ambience of friendship and comfortable fellowship which made Islam more meaningful and palatable to peasant participants. In this sense, Sūfism and its interpretation of religious law and texts shapes the Islamic character and breathes life into the dogmatic framework of Muslim religion in rural north-eastern Šāwa by deemphasising canon lawyers’ interpretation of *shari’ā* and highlighting the expression of religious emotion or *mābābbā* that links humankind to the divine. In *Sūfiyyā*, therefore, the *awliyā* complement the *ulamā* and *shari’ā* is seen in light of knowledge or *mā’rifā* and truth or *ḥāqiqāb*. Even if northern Šāwa is caught up by the process of social transformation, such a transformation has led to a traditionalist retrenchment perhaps as a medium of changing to old beliefs and past experiences and as a way of returning to saintly authority and mystic religious supremacy.

### ***Ziyārāb* or *Wārra* of Sūfi Saints**

Every year, particularly, around the third month of the Muslim calendar, *rabi’al Awwal*, Šāwa Muslim Ethiopians celebrate the *ziyārāb* or *wārra* of the shrines of important saints and great mystics. Sainly days throughout these shrines are marked by prayer and study sessions and discussions of Qur’ānic texts and performance of litanies of the Sūfi order

(*wird*). The reasons for *ziyārāb* or *wārra* may differ from individual to individual, but many visit shrines in search of protection against the dangers of life crisis events, to recover lost things, cure illnesses, exorcise festering spirits, seek mediation and arbitration in resolving family disputes and social conflicts, arrest fertility difficulties, cure mental derangements and other personal problems, and regain lost self confidences and moral stances. Many Muslim religious leaders also visited saintly shrines to renew and revise their license as spiritual advisers. Such incumbent seasonal tomb visitations thus involve the search for protection and purification, health and wealth, fertility and productivity of people and land, and renewal of knowledge and statuses. Sūfi saints also act as mediators and intercessors between pilgrims and their creator.

Their efficacious power of intercession with the creator is the hallmark of their saintly character. They are visited for their folk curing and healing abilities and honoured and respected for their blessings (*barakā*) and miraculous manifestations (*karāmāt*). As such pilgrims firmly believe that Sūfi saints, at least the living ones, are prominent in these functions because they are knowledgeable about the past and present domains of families and their communities. They are aware of most disputes, marriages, divorces, misfortunes and interpersonal relations. In this regard, they have a clientele and a sphere of influence. Pilgrims name their children after them, value their 'divine' words as much as they can, seek their help and advice in various matters and marvel at their miraculous deeds. Thus by virtue of their piety and spiritual authority, they as spiritual, social and moral mentors occupy a significant position of leadership in their community. In this sense, they are endowed with sacred aura and charisma.

These Sūfi saints are referred to as *fuqrā*, to denote living saints, and *awliyā* to indicate dead ones. Saints in Muslim societies in north-eastern Šāwa are therefore persons who may be alive or dead, but who are always idealised and do not have to await death to be canonised. Unlike their Christian counterparts, the career of Muslim saints does not begin only or end with death. Their reputation as Sūfi saints may even increase after death and they would then be viewed as more fully endowed with spiritual strength. In Muslim traditions of the region under consideration, a dead saint can appear to the living in visions and dreams. His canonisation is accomplished during his life time by his followers and disciples whose obedience to him as a saint and as a temporal leader is undisputed. Indeed, the recognition of saintly sanctity is in Islam invariably local (PANKHURST 1994b: 943). In fact, there is, as in Christianity, no formal body for deciding who the pious ones are. Sometimes a person is considered to be a saint on the basis of descent from religious leaders, uncanny acts or feats of scholarship or achieving social success. However, the influence of Sūfi saints does not entirely depend on their saintly families' standing or their personal laurels, instead they must constantly successfully intervene in community affairs in order to maintain their positions.

Sūfi lodges of these leaders accommodated the local beliefs and customs of their adherents, and this led to their sustained popularity. But *barakā* may also be acquired by individuals favoured by Allāh. Since Allāh given capabilities as well as individual characters vary, there are different kinds of Sūfi saints in north-eastern Šāwa. Some are ascetics leading a relatively impoverished existence amongst their books and thinking about the next world (*akbirā*) rather than this world (*dunyā*), while others can become quite wealthy through their clients' gifts or their involvement in various trades. In other

words, some live luxuriously while others exist in poor material conditions renouncing worldly life in order to devote themselves fully to Allāh.

Some are highly outspoken, while others speak out only when invited or provoked. But all are extremely respected and closely consulted. These individuals became living saints who in their lives exemplify extreme piety and simplicity. Saints' cults may also develop around individuals whose only distinction is to die under unusual circumstances, with their *barakā* becoming apparent post-mortem Lewis (1991: 56). Unlike Christian saints, Muslim saints, as observed earlier, are usually recognised in their lifetime and their designation does not derive from a formal declaration or canonisation by any religious institution. Instead it results from communal claim concerning community consensus among followers and disciples.

### Ziyārāh, Zāwiyā and Zar

Over the years Muslims and Christians of north-eastern Šāwa and other parts of Ethiopia have taken beliefs and practices centred around, but not restricted to, spirits (PELIZZARI 1993: 383). These beliefs, as shown by Setargew Kenaw (2000: 996) using other field experiences, concern the proliferation, elaboration and accommodation of zar cult or spirit possession trances of Muslim and Christian women whose participation in such collective chanting and communal dancing in search of exorcist resolutions stimulates the manifestation and permutation of their emotions. They also are about the search for resolution for women who, as Pili (2010: 159) shows using an urban field experience, are thought to have *wəqabé* and *aynä ṭəla* or have been afflicted by the evil eye or *buda* mostly during mealtimes, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and livestock herding, or still are known for been out of favour of the *adbar* of their village surroundings.

Although the ritualistic, thaumaturgic and para-liturgical aspects of saint veneration are, as Reminick (1975: 34) shows for northern Šāwa and Hussein Ahmed (2004:48) does the same for south Wällo, conspicuously visible in all the Sūfi shrines of north-eastern Šāwa, the ritual of reciting and studying *ḍikr*, both individually and collectively, as a way to salvation inspired a high standard of Islamic morality and imparted a sense of fraternity and solidarity among pilgrims through regularly held religious gatherings (*ḥadrā*) that disregard ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The *ḍikr* and other esoteric rituals that won the hearts and souls of the ordinary folk faithful made the spiritual exercises more durable and perceptible because they stressed rigorous and intense prayers and Qur'ānic readings as well as intercessory reflection and meditation without disturbing the deep roots of traditional values and beliefs. For example, individuals possessed by spirits and attacked by evil eyes, mostly women, are brought to the attention of holy men to be exorcised, as observed by Aspen (1994: 794) in northern Šāwa, and not to be appeased or reasoned with in order to give temporary respite as Lewis (1984: 421) claims using *Mačča* Oromo field experience. This is because spirits (*jinn*) may return regularly during pilgrimage periods in order to extract promises and material rewards from possessed individuals and continue their evil deeds on human lives and belongings.

Possessed patients are brought before the *fuqra* or the *khalifā* who attended them through human mediums and treated the ill by magical means and sometimes by



communicating with the spirits (jinn) themselves. The former summoned the harmful spirit, forced it to identify itself, and then expelled it. But if the spirit is useful to the patient, the medium advises the patient to meet the demands of the spirit usually gifts ranging from small livestock to perfumes that are offered during public séance performances and always in the presence of the living saint or the descendant of the dead saint who in turn makes supplications (*du'ā*) on behalf of the patients. In the meantime, the possessed person is an altered state of consciousness but continues to communicate with the medium and the saint simultaneously. During séance sessions, all participants are required to be free of contamination from menstruation or sexual interaction which necessitate ablution and purification. Moreover the burning of incense and sprinkling of perfumes adds to the cleanliness and sacredness of the séance ambiance while the chewing of at symbolically adumbrates the tuning with the invisible world of the supernatural forces.

The climax, as observed by Tubiana (1981: 20) in northern Ethiopia and by Lewis (1997: 54) in Somalia, is reached when women shout and utter esoteric words and phrases incomprehensible to others and eventually cool down and lose consciousness as a result of sheer physical exhaustion. In these contexts, the holy men act as soothsayers and curers or healers of those suffering from various forms of physical and mental ailments all of which may be well known signs and symptoms of mystical afflictions emanating from festering spirits or evil eye powers which are all confirmed during *dīkr* and *hādrā* sessions that are conducted by saints' assistants responsible for required sacrificial rites in the form of regular coffee boiling and serving, some at chewing, which prevents patients from falling asleep in the midst of religious rites and because it is regarded as a sacred vehicle through which divine grace is distributed and ingested, and chicken slaughtering in order to appease spirits. At the end, such patients gave gifts in the form of either cash, coffee, or cat to the shrine representatives in order to receive the blessing (*barakā*) of the *awliyā* and to somehow also economically maintain the day to day activities of the *ziyarāb*.

The fact that such pre-Islamic beliefs and ritualised sacrificial practices are exercised parallel to the Sunni Islamic *mawlid* celebrations indicates that the former still continue to exert influence on the life of the ordinary people. The coexistence of traditional beliefs or non-Islamic survivals and formal Islamic practices shows the syncretic nature of the Muslim religion in northern Šāwa. The popular character of Islam in these rural communities does not pronounce condemnation due to kissing of stones, circumbulation of shrines and exorcising of spirit possessions and other deviations, and all forms of reprehensible innovation contradicting Islamic orthodoxy or lapse into infidelity or idolatry within a Muslim community, instead pilgrims are comfortable with such acts because *ziyarāb* events provided social interaction and engendered a sense of communal cohesion among participants. The fulcrum and form of saint veneration in north-eastern Šāwa therefore provides platforms for *barakā* and *karāmā*, enunciates the link of the human with the divine, holds out to the pilgrim population an assurance of the continuity of the traditional Islamic communion, encompasses the gnosis of the *'ulamā* and the warmth of the followers of the *awliyā*, and holds sessions in order to exorcise possessed persons and cure individuals suffering from malefic 'glances'. This indicates that Sūfī mediation between *shari'ā* and *ṭariqāt* has a strong place in the rural

Muslim communities of north-eastern Šäwa. It is here that *ziyārāb* is woven into the stable social world where it has become a source of emotional gratification and spiritual inspiration for peasant pilgrims through the ossification of the calcium of mysticism and religious syncretism beyond the range of *ḍikr* composition, chain of blessing and divine vision. Sūfi sanctuaries thus provide psychological security in a fraternal circle built on communal cooperation or consensus expressed by collective identity.

## Conclusion

The mundane events relevant to the daily lives of Muslims in north-eastern Šäwa reflect patterns of relationship that are all the more important to peasant pilgrims precisely because they fall within the underlying conceptions of the workings of cosmos in this particular region. Such local spiritual stance places these Sūfi shrines in a powerful position revolving around a divinely ordered cosmological tradition based on pilgrims' shared understanding of the authority of local holy men or saints and mystics that promoted believers' inner religious feelings and senses and relieved them from festering spirits and rankling malefic powers. That is perhaps why the Sūfi shrines of north-eastern Šäwa and their mystical traditions continue to give true meaning to pilgrims' lives and to their sense of identity as Muslims in which the propagation of social and spiritual solidarity of shrine visitors is an effective means for upholding a meaningful Muslim community based on prescribed prayers and constant remembrance of the creator through the mediation of saints and shrines.

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