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Article

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Muslim Monasteries? Some Aspects of Religious Culture in Northern Ethiopia

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Introduction: Islam and Sufism in Ethiopia

In this paper I present some preliminary findings on some of the Sufi¹ centres or 'shrines' in Muslim Ethiopia, a traditional feature of religious culture in the country. Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) is a mystical movement affiliated (mostly) with Sunni Islam, aimed at the adherents gaining a closer connection to and higher knowledge of Allāh. It is geared to personal spiritual growth and union with Allāh, performed collectively, in fraternities or brotherhoods (Arabic pl.: *ṭuruḳ*), virtually all male. While a specific 'Sufi Islam' cannot be delineated as such because its thought has always been part of mainstream Islam (cf. the writings and impact of theologian Ibn al-ʿArabī, 1165–1240), there are differences in emphasis in religious practice and ideas, e.g., about the relation between humans and Allāh, as well as divergences in modes of Islamic worship and culture. It can certainly be argued that many Sufist representatives and leaders are different from more 'purist'-scripturalist and Wahhabist Muslim clerics who tend to label present-day forms of Sufism often as 'insufficiently Islamic'. In Sufist religious practice, the intermediary role of holy men or saints (Arabic pl.: *awliyāʾ*)² plays a great role.³

The present account is exploratory and based on work in progress, and intended to raise some new empirical and interpretive questions on Islam in Ethiopia; it is obviously not claiming to be an exhaustive study on the subject.

The study of Islam in Ethiopia is gathering momentum since the last 15 years due to the works of a new generation of both Ethiopian and foreign scholars. History, language studies and philology predominated so far, tracing the evolution, language use, religious institutions and some of the politi-

¹ The transcription of Arabic and Turkish words is based on the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, that of Gəʿəz and Amharic words on the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*.

² *Wālī* (singular of *awliyāʾ*) originally means 'friend', 'companion', 'trusted one', specifically in relation to Allāh.

³ For an introductory survey of Sufism, see the entry 'Taṣawwuf' in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. X (1998), pp. 314–340.

cal aspects of Muslim life in Ethiopia,⁴ but there is scope for much additional work, notably in the fields of social history, philology and the social sciences. This paper takes an anthropological approach, looking at Muslim life in a comparative socio-cultural and historical context, and viewing religious life and communal relations in Ethiopia as cultural phenomena, not primarily as theological or political ones.

In the study of Islam in Ethiopia, the larger context of the faith in the country is to be considered: its history, its migratory patterns, its social and cultural (inter-)relations with other religions, its indigenous character, and in general its being a part-identity next to others. Muslims in Ethiopia share many of the socio-economic problems of any other Ethiopians, and therefore it goes without saying that the wider societal instead of only religious-theological conditions of Muslim life are to be taken as the starting point.

Islam was present in Ethiopia from its emergence and early diffusion,⁵ and thus a long-standing tradition and feature of local life in many regions. In the past 600–700 years, its expansion has proceeded with both peaceful periods as well as violent confrontations, with intense but relatively short episodes of warfare in the 15th and 16th century⁶, as well as later clashes in the time of

⁴ Among the first, HUSSEIN AHMED of Addis Ababa University deserves to be mentioned. His book (2001) and numerous articles are essential to get a grip of the subject. Other pioneers in historical and anthropological studies on Islam in Ethiopia are U. BRAUKÄM-PER (2002) and E. Wagner on the history of Harar (1997, cf. WAGNER 2003). Valuable recent contributions on Islam were also made by, among others, AHMED HASSAN OMER, ABBAS HAJI, ALESSANDRO GORI, CAMILLA GIBB and ELOI FICQUET (2004, 2006). New work was also done on Islam in Eritrea, e.g., by JONATHAN MIRAN (2006). Other original work is contained in the BA and MA theses written at the History and Sociology Departments of Addis Ababa University, but these are difficult to access.

⁵ There is the well-known story of the first converts to the new faith who left Mecca in 615 for Ethiopia, before the prophet Muhammad had established his predominance in Mecca and feared Quraysh suppression. The migrants stayed under the protection of the Ethiopian king (probably *nəgus* ʾĪllä Gäbäz) and returned to Arabia after some years, and a grateful Muhammad did not allow violent conquest of Ethiopia (it was declared *dār al-ḥiyyād*, neutral, not *dār al-ḥarb*). Since the 8th century, especially the Red Sea coastal peoples of the Horn were slowly Islamized by traders, teachers, and others. Islam also gained adherence in the northern highlands, where small communities of Muslim traders, healers, craftsmen and teachers emerged. See TRIMINGHAM 1952: 44, CUOQ 1981: 28 and EMERI VAN DONZEL and GREGOR SCHOELER 2007: 30–32.

⁶ The most important conflict was the war (1529–1543) between the expanding Muslims led by the Harär-based leader Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al Ġāzī ('Grañ'), who led a 14-year devastating campaign of expansion and conquest from the eastern lowlands into the Christian-dominated highlands. Its origins can be found in the political rivalry between the emerging Muslim states/emirates in the east and the Ethiopian emperors and the conflict about tribute-paying and sovereignty. But notable in this episode was the

Ethiopian emperors Tewodros and Yoḥannēs IV in the 1860s and 1880s. As the Ethiopian highland state was of a strongly Christian signature since the late 4th century and derived its core symbolism and style of governance from Byzantine-Christian imperial traditions as well as from Christian writings, Muslims were inevitably politically marginalized, and tensions always remained under the surface (cf. Abbink 2007: 67). In this respect Ethiopian history and society, despite the dominance of one group or elite or religion over the other at various times in history, are best studied and understood as one whole, and not in separate communities (cf. Hussein 1992: 20).

Sufist Islam as a ‘formula of success’

Despite the political and numerical dominance of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, Islam gradually expanded in Ethiopia from a relatively early age. The reason for this is not only war and conquest (cf. the battles between emperor ‘Amdä Šəyon and the eastern Muslim sultanates in the 14th century, or Aḥmad Gragn’s war in the 16th century, see note 6), the leadership by Muslim missionaries and scholars who by their teachings and piety converted people to an authoritative, literate tradition and contributed to the development of a body of Muslim literature (cf. Hussein Ahmed, O’Fahey and Wagner 2003). Also important, perhaps decisive, was the unifying appeal of Sufi orders as mystical brotherhoods that emphasized common religious performance (e.g., through *dhikr*⁷ or meditative prayer recitation, praising God), initiation, piety and solidarity among common people. It also brought holy men with specific healing powers and a perceived power to work ‘miracles’ (Ar.: *karāma*). This latter aspect was a general feature of many early Muslim movements and leaders. In Wällo especially the Kādiriyya, Shādhiliyya and Sāmmaniyya Sufi orders became popular, gaining momentum especially from the late 18th century onwards.⁸

emergence, on the side of the Muslims, of an explicitly religious motivation for the wars and the destruction of Christian highland society and its religious infrastructure (see the 16th century work by ŠIHĀB AL-DĪN [ARAB-FAQĪH] 2003). In the course of the conflict, the Christian emperors (Ləbnä Dəngəl and Gālawdewos) also developed a religiously styled defensive attitude, and in the eyes of the participants the conflict thus became an explicit clash of faiths and ways of life.

⁷ More specifically *dhikr* refers to the complex of devotional acts aimed at creating closeness to or awareness of God, e.g. by reciting divine names and parts of the Qurʾān or *ḥadīth* literature.

⁸ Another important centre of Sufist Islam, with its own shrines and institutions, is of course the Muslim city of Harär, which I will not discuss here. See DESPLAT, 2005 and forthcoming; and AHMED ZEKARIA 2003. For historical aspects of Islamic culture in Harär, see WAGNER 1997; see also BRAUKÄMPER 1987 (included in BRAUKÄMPER 2002: 170–84).

Islam became thus deep-rooted and gave rise to specific modes of interaction with non-Muslims. The religiously and culturally plural society bred accommodation, exchange, pragmatic tolerance and even symbiosis between the (religious) communities, fed by underlying commonalities of local culture.

Due to the impact of the Sufi traditions in Ethiopia since the eleventh century, a rich spiritual culture and a variety of mixed religious practices were developed (cf. Berhanu Gebeyehu 1998; and forthcoming), with room for pre-existing traditions and customs of piety and devotion and not inimical to local culture if the core ideas of Islam were respected. This refers, e.g., to the treatment of spirit possession that could be done by saints, respect for local spirits, judicial functions of Muslim *abagar* (or 'father of the land') not on the basis of *shariʿa*, or to the adherence to mystical panegyrists (*madiḥ*). In addition, Arabic was hardly an indigenous language of Ethiopian Muslims. In this way Islam in Ethiopia received a certain national-cultural imprint. While part of mainstream Muslim faith since the 11th century, in Ethiopia the brotherhoods became the main vehicle of an Islam that developed in interaction with an ethnically and politically complex local society that in Ethiopia was primarily *oral* not literate in nature. It thus obtained an indigenous, local character, and a hybrid culture of religious practice emerged. In conjunction with Sufism a class of Muslim scholars (*shaykh* and '*ulamā*') also emerged, often with their origins in the Sufist movement themselves but maintaining stronger links with centres of Islamic learning in the wider Horn of Africa and in Middle-Eastern countries. But they did not replace the more widespread, 'popular' Sufi religious culture, which offered appealing, more accessible ways of piety, mystical experience, problem-solving, religious education and daily beliefs for the ordinary, non-literate people. As Hussein Ahmed noted in his historical study of Islam in Wällo (2001: 71):

... it was the *zāwiyya* or rural Islamic centres of education, and later on, with the expansion of Sufi orders, the various centres of local pilgrimage, rather than the trading stations and markets, which recruited converts to Islam, and laid the basis for the emergence of viable and prosperous Muslim communities in the countryside and town of the Ethiopian interior.

This is largely true, although the process was not without its tensions. While long periods of peace and accommodation between Muslims and Christians occurred, epoch-making violent campaigns of expansion played role in the spread of Islam in Ethiopia (as mentioned above, and see also note 6).

In the current ideological offensives of reformist/'fundamentalist' activists and NGOs⁹ – many from abroad (such as the Wahhabists from Saudi Arabia and also Iranian *Shī'a* groups) – these evolved local styles of Muslim practice and piety, such as *wādadja*, consulting 'saints', *mawlid* celebration, panegyric performance by *madīh*, burial ceremony, or joint activities with Christians, are under pressure. They are seen by these new purist Muslims as (in Arabic) *bid'a*, or 'unwarranted innovations'.¹⁰ Among the institutions rejected by the latter 'reformists' are the Sufi centres and shrines, many of them long established, and this is all the more remarkable and contested, as the Sufi orders were historically so successful in attracting adherents and solidifying Islam in northern Ethiopia, and offered a rich variety of spiritual life. Their leaders were neither illiterate nor unsophisticated country people, on the contrary.

Muslim rural retreats

Across northern and central Ethiopia, especially in Wällo, one finds many *zāwiya* or Muslim shrines, founded by saints of a Sufi order. The interesting thing is that some of them resemble 'monasteries' (and are called by the Amharic term *gādam*, like Christian monasteries). I call attention to the concept of monastery – without definitively stating that they can be in all respects be equated with the Christian counterpart or are directly derived from them – because the *zāwiya* in Wällo are places of retreat and religious study, where males and females separately have formed communities committed to pious life, prayer and the study of *Qur'ān* and Muslim law, and where the 'sinful' and 'contagious' profane world is kept at bay: they are retreats where people devote themselves to God. They follow a strict daily order both in the organization of labour tasks and ritual life. These 'monasteries' are not self-sustaining economic centres, but are mostly supported by farmers in the surrounding area and by private individuals who donate food, labour, cattle and money.

Initially, the notion of a Muslim monastery may seem puzzling, as celibacy and the self-isolation of believers in closed communities of one gender are not characteristic of Islam worldwide. But these institutions exist, and the idea of a monastery or convent in Islam is an old one. While orthodox Muslims often refer to *sūra* 57: 27 in the *Qur'ān*, suggesting that monastic life was not divinely ordained, the concept of (often temporary) seclusion

⁹ See MOHAMED SALIH 2004 for an overview of Islamic NGOs in Ethiopia since 1991.

¹⁰ This relates to a tradition of critiques on Sufism that goes back to at least the Sunni Muslim theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), not to speak of the long-standing enmity of the *Shī'a* towards Sufism. While Sufism displays the unitary features of Islam, it adds one feature that is not part of this (normative) unity: the adherence to saints and their powers (cf. TRIMMINGHAM 1980: 57).

or retreat (Ar.: *ḵhalwa*) for devotional purposes, is not unknown in Islam. Sufism in Islam 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, and to be initiated in a larger collective. Institutions of retreat for Muslims have existed in one form or another since the late 7th century, and are known under such names as *ribāt*, *ḵhānqāh*, *tekke*, *dergāh* and *āsītāne*, but many of these have military functions.¹¹ The word mostly used in Wällo is *zāwiya*, which is a Muslim Sufi holy place around the grave or shrine of a saint (or saints) which serves as a pilgrimage site. There is usually a settlement around the home of the saint's descendant-successor, where religious students and devotees live, and where people of many walks of life come on pilgrimage on certain days to pay respect, pray, receive blessings or advice or ask favours. The *zāwiya* are thus also known as places of *ziyāra* – visitations by the devout, or 'pilgrimage'.¹² They have no military or administrative nature whatsoever, like some of the above-mentioned institutions, notably the *ribāt*. As such historical forms of Muslim retreat have become very rare, comparison is difficult and will not be attempted here. The Wällo shrines, however, seem to always have been primarily places of religious learning and spiritual experience.

There is a network of Sufi shrines across Wällo, although they differ strongly among each other in size and nature. Some will *not* draw large crowds of pilgrims on festive days such as *mawlid* ('Birthday of the Prophet') or the anniversary of the shrine saints' death but are primarily places of study and devotion. Traditionally, the most important shrines (*zāwiya*) in Wällo are, first, Annā, followed by Dana, Ġama Nəguś and Gāta.¹³ The prestige hierarchy of the shrines, however, is not static but dynamic: some centres rise in popularity depending on the perceived quality of its religious education, atmosphere, or the efficiency of their 'answering' prayers and requests that people direct to it. Sometimes the mere easier accessibility and distance of a shrine plays a role. This explains e.g., the relative decline of the Annā shrine in the past decade.

¹¹ See for introductory information the various entries in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (New Edition): *ribāt* in vol. 8 (1995), pp. 493–506, *tekke* in vol. 10 (1999), pp. 415–416; *ḵhānqāh* in vol. 4 (1978), pp. 65–66, and *zāwiya* in vol. 11 (2002), pp. 466–470. As stated, a comparison with the Wällo retreats under discussion and these historical forms is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹² A general description of events on a typical pilgrimage day is given in HUSSEIN AHMED 1990: 66–68.

¹³ Other important shrines in Wällo are Dawway Arāra, Wārawayyu, Gaddo, Hiḡira, Dodota, Degiy, Garawa, Zibikkil, Šonke, Legot, Ya'a, Dägär, Färāqasa and the more recent Färāde.

The *zāwiya* in Wällo certainly have similarities with the historical Muslim ‘monasteries’ mentioned above (*tekke*, *khānqāh*, or, to a lesser extent, the *ribāt*), but also with forms of local Christian monastic life in Ethiopia. This institution has indeed acquired some typically Ethiopian traits, and may have been influenced by the Christian monastery, which was a well-established institution in medieval Ethiopia and encountered by Muslims when they entered and expanded into the Ethiopian highlands in this period. The model of monastic institutions as places of refuge and concentrated devotion to God in a reflexive, ascetic and celibate life-style may have been an inspiration, and their partial adoption of it by Muslims may show the mutual impact of the two religions in this region. A difference is that most of the inmates in a Muslim retreat, except for the *shaykh* and his family and some religious leaders, are more likely to be there on a temporary basis, often for a couple of years.

The Sufi shrines in Wällo form a kind of sacred topography. While many were brought to the area by *awliyāʾ* from the Muslim city Harar in the late 18th century (cf. Hussein Ahmed 2001: 68–69), they attained relative autonomy and formed a regional network in terms of their ranking, their inter-linkages, the ‘descent’ and affinal relations of the *awliyāʾ* or *shaykh*, and as institutions which religious students visit in succession (according to their specialization in one Islamic subject of study). The Sufi shrines thus can be said to form a powerful ‘mental infrastructure’ for Muslim life in rural Ethiopia.

Muslim retreats in Wällo: Ṭəru-Şina and Čali

Here I report on two such places in Southern Wällo, called Ṭəru-Şina and Čali.

The older of the two is Čali, a shrine located in Wore-Babo district and dating reportedly from the early 19th century and founded by adherents of the Ẓādiriyya order. The second one was founded in the 1950s, also by a Ẓādiriyya saint.¹⁴ It serves as the spiritual centre of the rural area, has a big mosque, hosts the incumbent *walī*, and has about 150 inhabitants. Interesting is that this place also has a nunnery, established nearby, with about 110 females. This form of religious life for Muslim females seems to be an Ethiopian innovation, most likely inspired by Ethiopian-Christian religious culture.¹⁵ One author (Ayele Teklehaymanot 1999: 436–438) has mentioned

¹⁴ I first visited Čali in October 2004 with a guide from Bistima and my research assistant Hāssan Muḥammed, and Ṭəru-Şina in the same month together with German linguist Andreas Wetter (Mainz University), who lived at the time in the town of Kāmisé. I am greatly indebted to him. Research on these places will be pursued in the near future.

¹⁵ It has also inspired Ethiopian-Jewish (Betä ʾĪsraʾel) religious culture, where monks and nuns were also known (see LESLAU 1957: 61–62; ABBINK 1984: 31–32; TOURNY 2002).

the existence of Muslim ‘nunneries’ where no men can enter: in Karamille (in the Dire Dawa area), in Gälämsö (Harär region), and in three other places. The number of female devotees seems to be modest (at the most, ca. 50), but their motivations resemble those of Christian nuns: living in celibacy, in poor material conditions, renouncing or giving up mainstream life, marriage and family life in order to devote themselves fully to God, to study and to teach others about their faith. They have their own mosque or prayer house and a Qurʾān school, and are led by senior females. Males do not enter for services or teaching. Food is brought to them and is partly prepared inside. Little is known about the nunneries, so no definitive statements can be made here. While monastery-like structures for males are known in the Muslim world (see above), the existence of nunneries is not.¹⁶

1. Čali

As said, this Kādiriyya shrine dates from the early 19th century, and has high prestige, although it is not a well-known one compared to the shrines of Annā, Gama Nəguś or Gāta. It lies in a remote location, but also in a strategic one – it is a ‘liminal’ centre, one might say – in a kind of no man’s land between the territories of Amhara, °Afar, Argobba and Oromo speakers. It can only be reached in a one-day drive via a difficult car road (by 4-WD only) from Däse, the Wällo capital. Most pilgrims come on foot or on horseback and mule, and need at least two to three days to get there.

The shrine was founded by people headed by *šeh* [= *shaykh*] Muḥammad Šafi, from the Yäğgu Oromo area in the eastern lowlands, and set up as part of a network of Muslim centres to propagate Islam in Wällo (cf. Hussein Ahmed 2007). The location was also chosen to allow for conversions and religious conflict mediation between the various local ethnic groups (Amhara, Oromo and °Afar).

Čali is a serene, quiet place at medium altitude, avoiding both heat during the daytime and cold at night. Inhabitants of the place were proud to tell us about the cleanliness of Čali: “See, we have no insects, no vermin here: the air and the soil are clean.” Indeed, at night we were not bitten by insects, and we did not get sand flea (jigger) problems, although we moved around on bare feet – an obligation within the area of the shrine. The inhabitants linked this to the idea that Allāh protected the place as a clean, holy site.

The *walī* and incumbent of the saints’ line in Čali today is *šeh al-hāğğ* Muḥammad Nadjīb, a young man in his late thirties. His two predecessors

¹⁶ At least no literature exists on it, except the casual reference of AYYELE TEKLEHAYMANOT 1999 mentioned above.

were his father and grandfather, but a male hereditary line is not the rule at the Sufi shrines.

Čali is a small fenced, partially walled settlement with a male and a female section, strictly separated, although the compound of the *šeh* directly leads to the female quarter where his wives and children live (fig. 1). The shrine has a large iron front gate, donated in gratitude by a wealthy *Christian* supporter of the shrine. Some houses of students and teachers are nearby, outside the fence. The compound has a big square mosque of 45 by 45 m and ca. 14 m in height, an adjacent reception hall for the *šeh*, and several other rooms for teaching and studying. On the south-eastern side of the compound are the graves of the previously Čali *šeh*. The graves of the two most senior ones were covered in a house built over the place (fig. 2). On the fringes are the graves of several other saints. This grave site is also fenced and cannot be entered at will.

Next to the grave compound, which is at the centre of the pilgrimage, is a large open space that serves as meeting, prayer and ritual place for the thousands of pilgrims who arrive on festive days like *mawlid*. Here the tents of worshipers are also pitched. Next to it is a small grocery shop where foodstuff, sugar, soap, incense, perfume, etc., can be bought.

The permanent inhabitants of Čali are the *walī* and his large family, religious teachers, candidate-initiates (*murīd*) for the Ẓādiriyya order, assistants, and students, varying from 12 to 28–30 years of age, several of them relatives of the *walī*. Daily life is marked by prayer, study and discussion of the Qurʾān and religious texts, and performance of *awrād* (sg. *wird*, the initiation litanies of the Sufi order) (see fig. 3), and by labour tasks needed for the community: building, repairing, and preparing the daily meals (the latter mainly by females in the other part of the compound). The *walī* and his advisors also receive guests and local people who come to the shrine for advice or conflict mediation. There is a spokesman or work leader called *kaddam*, who receives new people or visitors and guides them around. Many of the guests and pilgrims bring foodstuff and goods to the shrine, including imported clothes and scarves from Arab countries.

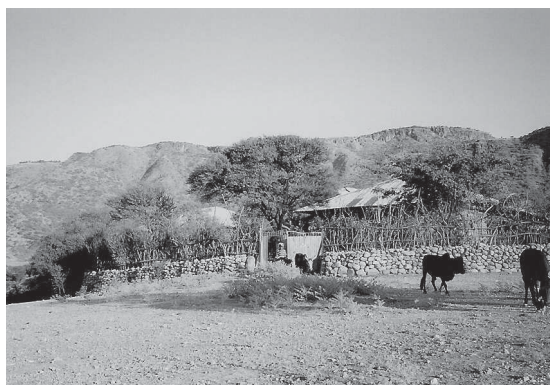


Fig. 1: The Čali fenced compound



Fig. 2: Grave of the first saint of Čali, late 18th century

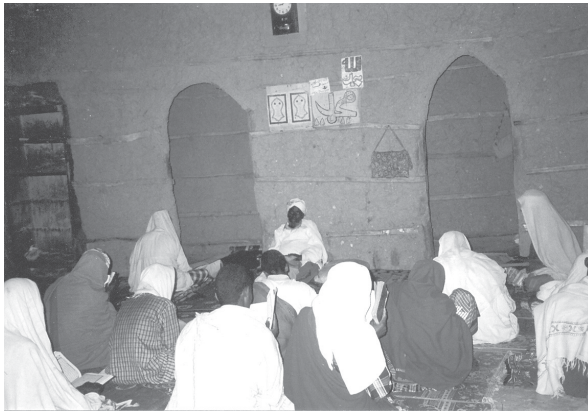


Fig. 3: Evening prayer and *awrad* performance in Čali mosque, Wällo, Ethiopia (Ramaḍān, 2004).

The current *šeh* of Čali, *al-ḥāḡḡ* Muḥammad Nadjīb, said:¹⁷

Čali is a place of prayer and service to Allāh. We study, teach and pray. We receive guests who need our advice and help them. We exercise to be near to Allāh ... We as Muslims don't so much care about 'history', we care about our line [lineage of saints, J.A., i.e., the *silsila*] and about living according to Allāh's rules, here and now, then and in the future. We can tell you about my blessed forefathers, and the way we live here, but not much about the history of Muslims and how they came to this area. We already came long ago; this was Muslim country for many ages.

He also mentioned the debate about the 'new Muslims' of more strict, 'Wahhabi' or Salafist persuasion who are active in the towns, and who argue against the Sufi traditions, saying:

... they go against Islam, against even the Qur'an as we know it and as they always had practiced it. We are not interested in their interpretations of our faith. People can do *ziyāra* [pilgrimage to saints' sites] and *mawlid*. The Qur'an does not forbid it. ... We are mediators, not substitute for Allāh.

¹⁷ Interview, 22 October 2004.

In addition, he and others at the shrine complained about the troubling developments in the Ġimma area (in Oromiya Region), where in the past years (1997 to October 2004, the time of the interview) some 150 rural Sufi mosques were allegedly burned down by these new Muslims or *akrari* (Amharic: 'extremist'), as he called them. In such remarks we see that local Muslims make a difference between their way of Islam and that of the scripturally oriented, 'revivalist' and newly pious Muslims (often trained abroad), who claim to 'purify' Islam from its national and cultural 'accretions'. This debate is ongoing in Ethiopia (cf. also Erlich 2007; Kabha and Erlich 2006).

As in other shrines, the religious leaders at the Ġali settlement expressed great skepticism about the intentions of these revivalist Muslims in the towns, who reject all they stand for. Remarkable is that these two parties never meet: the town-Muslims are scathing about the country *šeh* and judge them on the basis of stereotypical hearsay and newly gained dogmatism; because they never visit the shrines, they do not know how 'orthodox' and literate most of the shrine *walī* in fact are. Here again it is shown that while there is intense debate about interpretations and varieties of Islam, firm dichotomies do not really exist.

2. Ṭəru-Šina

The second one, Ṭəru-Šina, is an off-the-road place somewhere near Harbu town in South Wällo. It is secluded and not visible from the outside. This shrine is the most 'monastery-like' shrine of all Sufi centres in Wällo.

The centre was founded only in the 1940s or 1950s by a Ḳādiriyya order saint, *šeh* Abdulraḥmān Abdussāmad coming from Annā, another shrine, and has been successful as a centre not so much of pilgrimage around a saint's tomb but of religious study and prayer, attracting students and people interested in mystical devotion to God. Many younger people from the surrounding areas (from Argobba, Oromo and Muslim Amhara) came there to spend several years of training and reflection, before returning to mainstream society and continue as trader, teacher, cleric, or functionary. Some remained for their life. The total number of males here is ca. 150. The nunnery nearby has about 100 women. While some married men live in the male compound, their wives cannot enter, and sexual relations are strictly forbidden in the entire settlement. These men usually stay temporarily in the settlement – a couple of years. There is no cultivation and livestock keeping within the settlement. All is brought or bought from outside, via donations from believers and well-wishers, and otherwise supplied by neighbouring peasants. The preparation of food is a big operation every day (fig. 4) and like repair work, building tasks and other necessary work, is done in a *corvée* labour system, with people taking turns, although some specialize in certain tasks.



Fig. 4: Preparing the food after the Ramad'an fasting day, Ṭəru-Şina, Wällo, 2004

voluntarily taking the assigned tasks. The entire compound, several hectares large, is kept scrupulously clean. People, including all guests, cannot walk inside the settlement with their shoes on and leave them at the entrance (fig. 5). Spitting, shouting and scraping the throat are forbidden. People visibly enjoy the peace, quiet and serenity of the place, and all go to the mosque for service. Women and female babies or children never enter.



Fig. 5: The entrance of the Ṭəru-Şina settlement

stay in an Arab country, e.g., Siradj, a young man of 28:

Yes, I was for some years in Saudi Arabia, I went there for work and to learn about the country and about Islam. I was in Djeddah. I would have liked to report otherwise, but we [Ethiopians] were not liked there, even though we are also Muslim. I was so often called a

The current *wali* is the second since Ṭəru-Şina's founding and is called *šeh* Seyyid. He is a remarkable ca. 80-years old man – patient, sympathetic, pious. Like in Čali, there is a *kaddam*, a person who receives guests and is spokesman and work organizer. This establishment is marked by strict discipline and order, with everybody

Among the inhabitants are a number of former migrants to Saudi Arabia or Yemen, as well as some ex-delinquents or socially problematic cases. They are assigned a partner from the settlement who 'guides' and assists them, teaching them what to do and why. Some told us stories full of deception about their

‘black’, and there were always problems with my pay and with working conditions. There was also this religious police. People in Saudi Arabia are not good people.¹⁸

People with such experiences and related personal problems seem to come to Ṭəru-Şina to regain confidence in themselves and to discover what Islam means to them. The mystical ways of Sufism often help them, in inculcating them with a new *habitus* of religious praxis based on communal life and values. Families that have problems with their children send them to Ṭəru-Şina to have them taught moral compass and develop more social responsibility.

The pride of Ṭəru-Şina is the big new mosque (fig. 6). This is indeed one of the biggest wooden mosques in Ethiopia, measuring some 80 by 80 m with a height of 20 m, and took years to build. The wood is hard juniper-tree wood, brought from 15–20 km distance from Mt. Rikke, a Muslim Argobba area. The architect of the mosque was *Ato* Muḥammad Aman, but it was built by collective effort of Ṭəru-Şina’s inhabitants and the surrounding Muslim farmers. Of all the Sufi settlements in Wällo, Ṭəru-Şina is the most like a monastery.



Fig. 6: The huge wooden mosque of the Muslim ‘monastery’ of Ṭəru-Şina, Wällo, 2004

The monastery model

When comparing these two Sufi *zāwiya*, one could sum up their characteristics as follows:

- Their underlying core idea is: their ‘remoteness’ – they were established away from, literally removed from, the noise of the profane world, from roads, cities, markets, etc.;
- Males and females live in separated spaces;
- Members take care of their own life, strive for autarchy, prepare their own food and drink, do their own cleaning, washing etc. They do not cultivate and raise livestock, only growing some garden crops and spices. Grains, animals for meat consumption, and other supplies are bought or brought as

¹⁸ Interview, 17 October 2004.

voluntary gifts by people from the surrounding countryside, as a pious gift to Allāh. Some things are bought with cash gifts of devout people;

- The life style followed is one of material simplicity: no desire for wealth, entertainment, material objects, money, etc.;
- Asceticism within the settlement, no sexual relations;
- Personal and community cleanliness are emphasized;
- Work tasks in the centre are divided in the communal *corvée* service;
- Well-organized daily religious services and prayer/study sessions;
- The religious leaders in the settlements offer mediation to others in times of conflict or family problems (regarding inheritance, marriage problems, illnesses or infertility), and blessings are sought from the incumbent saints
- They are centres of religious training and education. Some families sent one of their sons to become a religious teacher or expert, or to go through a period of training;
- They indirectly provide services as a place for ‘mental recovery’, so to speak, for disturbed or wayward youngsters. These mostly young inhabitants were sent there by their families to treat psychological problems from which they were expected to recover through ordered life and religious devotion;
- They are inter-faith centres of pilgrimage (*ziyāra*). The accumulated holiness or divine grace that is seen as inherent in the saint and the saintly line of transmission (Ar.: *silsila*) attracts Muslims and non-Muslims inspired by pious examples. The reverence (but *not* ‘cult’ in the sense of divinizing the saints) is held to bring beneficial influence and healing powers, both for Muslim and Christians open to God. In a way, the reverence of saints replaces or subsumes that of ancestors and local spirits, who were revered in earlier generations;
- Members of a shrine or monastery strictly keep away from any national politics and from inter-religious rivalries.

Conclusion

I argue that there is some justification to compare these Sufi centres or shrines with monasteries, when we observe their paramount spiritual character: they are regular centres of learning, prayer, devotion, healing and religious (mystical) experience, where people live sober and in celibacy and are seen as exemplary for others, and places without any political, administrative or military functions. This differentiates them from most of the historical forms of Muslim places of retreat. As such, they reflect at least in part the more general religious culture of Ethiopia, marked by communal adherence to a theistic worldview and a profound commitment to religious

values concerning the fate and destiny of humans. A study of the life at the centres and of the careers of their inhabitants bears this out. This element of religious commonality, the result of age-long mutual influences and contacts, applies to Christian, Muslim and traditional religions (with the later as a rule also recognizing a paramount Sky God). The Muslim shrines discussed are all cenobitic (i.e., with people living in communal form) in opposition to eremitic: the latter is only found among the Ethiopian Christians.

These Sufi centres are not dying out. In fact, some – like Ṭəru-Şina – are reinforced and get a modest but regular flow of youths, both rural and urban, often even ex-labour migrants, disaffected with Wahhabist, Salafist or other neo-orthodox/‘fundamentalist’ forms of urban Islam, which will continue to pose a serious challenge to Sufism in Ethiopia and in Africa in general.¹⁹ While the dichotomy should obviously not be exaggerated, as ‘orthodox’-revivalist Islam and Sufism have always intermingled and sometimes mutually reinforced one another, in much of contemporary Africa, including Ethiopia, there are rival streaks of interpretation of the Muslim tradition. Empirically speaking it can be seen that Muslims at the shrines in northern Ethiopia are ambivalent about the ‘Wahhabi’-‘Salafi’ revivalists. At any rate, the young newcomers go to the *zāwiya* to recover or get in touch with the (Sufi) *awliya*’ and their views and practices of Islam. The case of these Muslim Sufi centres thus illustrates the accommodative religious amalgam that Ethiopia represents, with mutual influences absorbed within the various traditions. Wällo is perhaps the best instance of it, and in its ‘traditional’ religious intermingling and communal understandings perhaps even provides a model of ‘(post)modernity’, where grand traditions meet, where unambiguous identities are doubtful, and where hybridity and interaction are emphasized. This paper has only scratched the surface, but enough to contend that viable, indeed inspiring, forms of ‘monastic’ Muslim culture seem to exist in Ethiopia. In several respects, these places and their inhabitants are impressive in their quiet and authentic pursuit of religious culture and morality.

In view of the globalizing processes of collective identity (re)formation, both from a political-economic and religious point of view, the study of the interaction of historical forms of Sufism and modern scriptural-orthodox or ‘fundamentalist’ Islam with messages of dogmatism, exclusivism and rejection of hybridity, there is a special need for more anthropological-historical studies of Muslim religious culture in Ethiopia, its mechanisms of survival, and its changing connections with the wider society.

¹⁹ See, e.g., RYAN (2006: 209), and also the discussion by ERLICH (2007: 196–200) of a rather preposterous book by a leading Saudi cleric on Ethiopia, also outlining a programme of how to “reform” Ethiopian Islam.

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Summary

This paper presents some *preliminary* observations on Sufi Muslim shrines or retreats in the Ethiopian Wällo region, places where local Muslim holy men or 'saints' lead the faithful and act as religious mediators and advisors. Some of these retreats of Sufi Muslims have a 'monastic' character, and allow males and females a life of reflection and devotion to God. An obvious parallel with Christian monasteries presents itself, referring to a partly shared religious culture. Some reflections on the extent and nature of this similarity are made, and the need for a fresh approach to the study of religion in Ethiopia/Africa, in the context of contemporary debates about religious identity and the hardening of communal boundaries, is underlined.