The Myth of the Tishana-Me'en "Kingship" (Southern Ethiopia)

Ideological Reflections of Socioeconomic Change

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1. Introduction

The oral tradition of the Tishana Me'en, an ethnic group of about 60,000 shifting cultivators in southern Käfa, Ethiopia, is in a process of radical reorientation. The Me'en, who are largely nonliterate, never had an organized and formally transmitted historical tradition, either by means of memorized speech or by precise genealogical lists, but their clans and lineages have stories of their origin, growth, dispersal, and of notable leaders (compare Vansina [1985: 14 f.] for genres of oral narrative). The transmission of this informal but rich body of oral tradition is variable and subject to modification. Indeed, Tishana-Me'en life is changing to such an extent that many of these stories of origin are not only modified and "impoverished" but are also disappearing. This process is not only due to the nonstandardized and nonformal character of the oral tradition, which discourages structured transmission, but is also a reflection of important political and economic changes in the society and group identity of this formerly agro-pastoral people.

These changes have become especially pertinent in the last few decades and comprise the following:

1. erosion of the pastoral way of life (partly due to loss of cattle) and change towards a mode of subsistence based on horticulture and grain cultivation;
2. loosening of the economic and sociocultural bonds with the agro-pastoral lowland Me'en, like the Dabashinto (or "Nyomonit"), the Chirim, and the Mela;
3. incorporation of Dizi and Bench people, and resultant assimilative tendencies;
4. increasing political incorporation into the wider Ethiopian society;
5. the start of a Christian missionary enterprise among them by the S.I.M. (Society for International Missions) and the K'alehiywot Church. A mission station was built in the northern Me'en area (in Tik'imt Eshet, south of Shäwa Bench town) in 1991, aimed at forming educated Christian cadre among them, while also giving medical aid, and starting a literacy program and supplementary primary education (up to grade 6) in the Me'en language. This approach is in line with official Ethiopian state policy (after 1991) of educating the various ethnic groups in their own language, at least in the first formative years in primary school.

While the effects of the changes of the first three kinds have been endogenous, gradual ones, those of the last two may be radical, and if we were nostalgic about the way of life of the Me'en as an independent, autonomous people, we could say that all this will probably lead to another case of a people losing their original character and sociocultural integrity, without being quite sure of the effects and benefits of all the changes.

2. The Nature of Oral Tradition among the Me'en

In this article I present a dominant version of the "origin myth" of the Tishana Me'en (in the highlands north of the village of Maji up to Shäwa Bench). This myth is a particular and telling reflection of changes in the Me'en way of life in the first half of this century, when a large part of the people had gradually moved out of the Shorum and Omo River valleys into the more temperate highland zones. As already emphasized in a previous study (Abbink 1992), Me'en oral tradition is not a body of canonized stories, told and handed down by

specialists. It is neither a guarded tradition from which people can derive claims to lands, etc. The Tishana-Me'en do not keep a "royal tradition" or genealogy either.

The Me'en are originally an "acephalous" society, i.e., without recognised leadership positions in a political sense. Only a limited number of original clans (*kabucoch*) have hereditary lines of authority, some of whom were recognised throughout the Me'en population, e.g., those of the *komoruts*, or "rain controllers," who originally had somewhat of a priestly, mediatory function. The Me'en oral tradition as a whole is a conglomerate of shifting clan, family, and migration histories. While it reflects complicated patterns of descent and alliance, the tradition is not formalized or centralized, and not transmitted in a controlled manner. The stories reflect the dynamics of social relations between people and groups at certain points in time, although with the memory of clan and lineage lines showing continuity and orientation. Me'en myths or stories can neither be seen in abstract terms as a body of elaborate, systematic analogies of relations or problems in the human domain with those in the animal or the natural domain, as in the American Indian myths as, e.g., analyzed by Lévi-Strauss in his famous "Mythologiques" (1964–71) and later works. Me'en myths or stories have a tinge of legend, containing a native interpretation of local and group history.

The myth which follows fits into this pattern. From an historical point of view, it is an unique piece of information which will never be recorded again, being a fleeting though cogent reflection of a crucial phase in Me'en history.[1] It is the product of a situation which the Me'en already have gone beyond. For example, the power and prestige of the *komoruts* and the ancestors mentioned here is substantially reduced, the territorial groups are more and more dispersed, and new authority structures, e.g., through the *k'ebeles* and the Me'en self-organization (since 1992, set up by the new authorities), having introduced new leadership positions tied to the central state administration. The myth illustrates the dynamic and shifting character of oral traditions and group identity by presenting a version of indigenous history and group relations at one juncture, but still is the sediment of a general process of change.

3. The Story

To make sense of the story, a brief comment on the nature of Tishana Me'en[2] society and history may be necessary. They linguistically belong to the South-East Surmic subgroup within Nilo-Saharan, and live in a patrilineal, decentralized society, economically based on the subsistence cultivation of sorghum, maize, wheat, t'eff, and horticultural crops (cabbage, coffee, peas, beans, taro). The Me'en also hunt, gather, and exploit beehives (honey is one of their scarce cash crops). They hold livestock (cattle, goats, sheep), but in small numbers. The southern Me'en, northeast and east of the town of Maji, have larger numbers of cattle, often placed among the herds of Bodi-Me'en relatives and bond friends living across the Shorum and Omo Rivers. Sufficient rainfall is crucial for both agriculture and cattle-keeping. However, rain is always unreliable. Thus, the "rain masters" traditionally had an important ritual function, which was especially marked in the period that the Me'en were predominantly agro-pastoralists. Their political structure was traditionally egalitarian. Since the late 19th century, the Me'en, many of whom moved into the highlands northwest of the Shorum-Omo Valley, have been in contact with highlanders (like Dizi, Kaficho, Bench, and northern immigrants), but some measure of political incorporation started only in the revolutionary period (1974–1991). In 1977 a new rural organizational framework was introduced: the *k'ebele* peasant associations. Most (but not all) Me'en were included in them, leading to a change of the internal authority structures, and often to divisions within

1 This version is mainly based on the story told by Serewa, a man of the Mo'ach clan, and recorded in 1968 by Mr. William F. Muldrow, the first teacher/missionary in the Me'en area (in the 1960s). I checked this story with other Me'en (e.g., with Kamane Boshu of Dulum, in October 1989) and basically got the same information, but in a more fragmented form. I also consulted Ato Teka Aba Mamo of Bach'uma village in various conversations during 1991 and 1992. I am very grateful to these informants.

In 1990, while on a trip in the southern Me'en area, I did not succeed in meeting Serewa, who was then living in Ch'iru *k'ebele*, near the former village of Shasha. In June 1993, I tried again, but then heard that he had died about a year before.

Serewa's story is the best and most complete version, and therefore serves as the basis of the text presented here. I deeply appreciate Mr. Muldrow's generosity in sharing with me his knowledge on the Me'en.

2 "Tishana" is a greeting in the Me'en language, used by northern immigrants to designate the Me'en. It is used here to differentiate the Me'en (northwest of the Omo) from the Mela, Chirim, and Dabashinto ("Nyomonit").

the local community. In 1993, the new EPRDF[3] authorities in the area stimulated the formation of an ethnic Me'en self-organization, and leading members of this grouping, supervised by the ruling party, have gradually been installed as officials of the local administration in the Me'en area, replacing northerners. Traditional Me'en leaders like *komoruts*, clan elders and folk healers/diviners are not directly involved in this new administrative structure. But they retain their influence in local life in other spheres.

The Text

When the Tishena lived in Chomu,[4] they became too crowded; their country became too small. During dry years it was hard. Nyamon Shua[5] was the "king." Nyamon was Lord of the world ... He had two sons, Banja and Boshu. Boshu was the younger. Also there was Koli, who was a Tishana, but not related to Nyamon[6] ... he was Shua's *kokó*.[7] Koli's people and Shua's people could intermarry. Also there was a "servant group" of the Tishena called Yidinit,[8] who were the servants of the "king" and his family, and could not intermarry with them.

Shua sent the Yidinit to the high country to the east to look for a new country. They came back to report that they had found a good country, with wide grasslands and rivers and mountains.

Shua called his older son Banja. He gave Banja some cattle, including the "king's cow," called *bi-de-keti*, which had one horn pointed to the ground and the other to the sky.[9] He also gave him grain-seeds and spears, machetes,[10] and hoes. Along with this he was given instructions as how to live – how to build his houses, plant grain, etc. Then, blessing him by the traditional spraying with a mouthful of coffee, he sent him to the new country to find a place to live.

Banja then went, with many of his people, with cattle and the "king cow" and with the seeds his father Shua had given him. By way of Tirma[11] and Dimi, he came to Dimut, a country which lies to the north of Shasha[12] and towards the Shorum river.[13] Koli came with Banja and was Banjas *kokó*.

Afterwards, Shua said to Boshu: "Our cattle and wealth have gone with Banja. Go to where he is and each of you choose a place to live."

Boshu then left with many cattle and his people and also with the Yidinit servant people. But Shua did not come – he stayed behind in Chomu.

When Boshu arrived in Dimut, he said to his brother: "Our father has sent me to you, and now you must divide the wealth ... Choose either the 'king cow' (*bi-de-keti*), or the 'kingship' of the grain with the knowledge of prayer for rain." But Banja said: "We will live together and share both." So they became angry and started arguing.

Finally Banja said: "Let us throw our spears to see who is the greatest." Banja was the first to throw the spear. It travelled very far and entered deeply into the earth. Boshu's spear, however, did not go far. When he pulled it out of the earth, it came out blade and shaft together. When Banja pulled his out, however, the shaft came out but the blade remained in the ground. Banja said: "I cannot leave this place: my spear has remained here." This place is called Berfata.[14] It is a *kos*, a "storehouse of the king's things."

Banja then gave the *bi-de-keti* to Boshu, and kept the ownership of the grain and the knowledge to pray for rain for himself. Boshu took the *bi-de-keti* and went to the banks of the Phacha River (the Omo), west of the Shorum. There he killed a cow to read the intestines to see if this was the country in which he was to settle. But the signs in the intestines read: "This country is not for you – go on further." Boshu left there, however, a spear (Me'en: *ber*), a drum (*kul*), and a cowbell (*b'elach*). He also milked some milk from the *bi-de-keti* in a gourd, poured part of it out on the ground and left the gourd and the remainder of the milk with the other items on a mountain in the middle of a forest. This place is also called *kos*. Boshu's Yidinit still live in this part of the country (beyond Jalau's country) and are called

3 Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front, the dominant party in Ethiopia after May 1991, when the Mengistu regime was violently ousted by them. Its Amharic/Tigrinya acronym is EHADIG.

4 An unknown place, probably to the west, in Sudan.

5 Shua is the name of one of the most important old clans of the Me'en, with a *komorut*-line.

6 The sudden introduction of Koli seems out of place here.

7 Being *kokó* in relation to a certain group means: a) belonging to a group with which marriages can be contracted; b) entertaining a relationship of "ritual assistance" with another group, relevant at certain occasions.

8 These are the Kwegu (or Koegu) people, hunter-gatherers living close to the Omo River and said to be the original inhabitants of the area before the Me'en came. Cf. the relationship of the Kwegu with the Mela (Fukui 1994).

9 These directions of the horns of this cow illustrate the mediatory role of Shua as the foremost *komorut*, mediator between the sky-god Tuma above and the people on earth below.

10 Impossible, because machetes (called *banga*) are only a recent introduction dating from the middle of this century.

11 Tirma is the name (and area) of a Suri group, living about 20 to 25 kilometers southwest of the town of Maji, near the Sudan border.

12 Shasha is the name of a former Amhara and Italian fortified village on a mountain ridge, known to the Me'en as Gumi It is now virtually abandoned. It overlooks the plains west and east towards the Shorum River.

13 A northern tributary of the Omo River.

14 I.e., "place where the spear was stuck." It is in a grove in the present-day Darja *k'ebele*, in the southeastern Tishana area.

Gwombol. They know where the *kos* is.[15] Other people are afraid of this place and do not enter. If Boshu comes and kills a cow and the Yidinit carry a gourd of coffee and pour it out, then the original items may be seen.

After leaving the *kos*, Boshu crossed the Shorum River and came to Koyshia, the country below where the Konta people live. The low country was empty. The Konta lived in the mountains and did not object to Boshu's coming.[16] Here Boshu killed another cow and read the entrails. This time, they said: "The low country is yours. Don't go up into the high country." So Boshu stayed there where he is today. During the Italian occupation, the Italians came into this area and "finished" his cattle,[17] so for a time he moved across the (Shorum) valley near Ch'ebera, and six or seven years ago[18] returned to Koysha.

Banja stayed in Dimut. He did not bring any Yidinit with him and there are none among his people to this day. He brought Koli with him (his *kokó*). Koli's descendants are now very few.

Now a descendant of Banja bears his name as a title (Banja). It passes to his oldest son if he has a son; to a daughter if he has no son. In recent times, the Banja title passed to Ñiluwa. Ñiluwa's son Galameri died without having any children, so the title passed to his sister Tulkush Ñiluwa, the present Banja. She, however, is a transvestite, and will not marry and have children.[19] But she does have the authority to pray for rain.[20]

15 There is some confusion about the exact location of the Boshu *kos*. Informants told me that the Boshu's real *kos* is now across the Shorum, in Banchak (or Donoata). This would match with the presence of the Yidinit (Kwegu), who were not found west of the Shorum and Omo Rivers, but only to the east, among the Bodi and Mursi.

16 There are, however, many armed conflicts on record between the Konta and the Me'en since the mid-19th century. The last big raid of Me'en (a combined Bodi – southern Tishana force) to the Konta and Kullo area dates from 1992.

17 It is not clear what is meant here: perhaps the Italians threatened to come down and subdue the Boshu or bomb their cattle because they did not submit to Italian authority. Some contemporary Me'en informants said that Boshu's cattle was not really hurt by the Italians. The Boshu *komorut* at that time was a man by the name of Baniaji.

18 I.e., in 1960–61.

19 This applies to the situation around 1968. The present-day holder (1996) of the title is a brother's son of Ñiluwa, called Beyene Banja. Strangely enough, the Me'en in 1993 still talked about Tulk'ush Ñiluwa as living, and as being "the real Banja." But her/his real location, status and function were shrouded in mystery. Perhaps the Me'en, by saying that Tulk'ush was a transvestite, have tried to explain the curious and unheard-of fact that the Banja, their main rain master (*komorut*) of the old days, the paramount ritual bringer of rain and fertility, was *infertile*: a supreme anomaly, which would have ended the line of the Banjas if not for designating a successor from a collateral line of the family.

20 Some informants added information on another "rain king" in the Gesha area, called Bilemu: "At Gesha there is a 'rain king' whose title is Bilemu, who got his authority to pray for rain from Banja. If times get very hard (drought), Bilemu brings tobacco, a cow, and coffee and gives it to Banja. The cow is slaughtered at Berfata (Banja's *kos*, see above) and coffee is boiled. Bilemu and Banja plus a *kokó* pray together for rain. Without a *kokó* no 'king' can pray. The *kokó* brings the first blood from the cow in a gourd, Banja brings coffee in a gourd, and the two liquids are poured over an altar place. They pray to Tuma (God). Everyone may eat the meat, which must all be finished the same day. Remaining bones and hide are burnt on the fire." The Bilemu title still exists. The current Bilemu, called Neßise Bilemu, is an important local community leader of the western Me'en in Gesha, an impressive man with great prestige. Both Bilemu and Banja recognise a distant genealogical (clan) relationship.

21 The word "king" used by several informants (also by Serewa in his story – see note 1), is misleading. there was no "kingship" among the Me'en in the sense of sacred hereditary leadership with privileges, regalia or sacred insignia, central political power, a "court" or a retinue of servants and followers.

4. Comments

This story was told as a kind of "charter myth" of the Tishana Me'en, explaining the origin and functions of their leading "rain chiefs."[21] In it, several organizing themes are notable:

- sibling rivalry within the leading Me'en clan;
- migration as a response of environmental and demographic problems;
- a ritual contest between rivals;
- the dynamics of ethnic relations, reflecting hierarchy (Yidinit) and difference (Koli), but at the same time cooperation or symbiosis;
- a concern with the sources of legitimate "leadership" in the communities;
- a desire to control and bring about rain, growth, and fertility. Thus the story expresses familiar themes in Me'en life (and in African rural life in general), including a concern with continuity and reproduction.

Underlying all these themes is a historical process of long-term change in the mode of subsistence of the Me'en. The gradual transition from agro-pastoralism to more horticultural or agricultural existence was the characteristic development which has shaped their society over much of the past century, and which has – probably indeed for demographic reasons, see line 1 – led to a decisive differentiation of the Tishana from the Bodi Me'en (i.e., Mela and Chirim). Shua, Boshu, and Banja are, however, mythical names, now titles. The history of the dispersal and possibly the very emergence of the Tishana Me'en as distinct from the Mela and Chirim, is telescoped in the story of the quarreling brothers. This telescoping is, of course, a familiar aspect of oral traditions in which generational genealogies are not strictly kept, e.g., in written form. Shua and Boshu are

names of present-day clans of ancient origin (the "Bosh" clan also exists among the Mela, although relations are not recognized between them and the Tishana[22]). Banja, however, is not a clan name but only the title of the line of rain chiefs within the "Chiruwa" clan (a clan of the more prestigious former Balmogut or Ngaib'ua "moiety").

In terms of the migration route allegedly followed by Banja and Boshu, it is remarkable that the account traces it through the (present-day) Suri country, west of Maji. Despite the contemporary tradition reiterated by Me'en that they came "from the Omo Valley," this route through the "Tirma country" is more likely, and may illustrate the possible links the (proto-)Me'en may have had with the (proto-)Suri (who are of the same language family, Southeastern Surmic, and have many similar cultural traits).

The story confirms also the impression gained from ethnohistorical research that the Me'en were never a purely pastoral people but always were herders as well as cultivators. But we see in addition that the story reflects the migration and "division of labour" in terms of specialisation on agro-pastoralism (Boshu) and cultivation (Banja) of Me'en groups led by rain chiefs sent out by Shua, the "father," i.e., the ancestor clan, of all Tishana (cf. Abbink 1992). This group specialisation still existed in the early 1990s among the Tishana, together with a recognition by highland Me'en that the Boshu people (in the Shorum Valley) were closest to being the "real Me'en" of the past.

Interesting and slightly puzzling, however, may be the fact that Banja is presented as the senior brother, who received the knowledge of cultivation as well as the largest part of the herds. Boshu – whose more pastoral way of life reflects, one would presume, the earlier stage of subsistence of the Me'en people – comes to him to receive the herds and the *bi-de-keti*, instead of the other way around. Hence, the myth cannot be seen to corroborate any evolutionary stage of development of agricultural specialisation "out of" a pastoral basis: the process of change may in reality have been much more complex.

In this respect, the figure of Banja deserves more attention. There are several indications that Banja is a compound figure, and his role a reflection of the contacts of Me'en with Dizi people, who are sedentary root crop and grain cultivators in the highlands south of the Me'en area. There is a long history of contacts between the two groups: intermarriage, alliances between chiefly families, economic exchange, incorporation. Most notably, the fact that Banja, when he entered the new territory (the highland area), built a *kos* is very significant, because it resembles the *kwoz*, the "sacred place" of the Dizi chiefs (Haberland 1993: 280). Also, the description of Banja as keeping the "kingship of the grain," having the knowledge to pray for rain, and possessing chiefly paraphernalia, is reminiscent of that of a Dizi chief. The traditional Me'en *komoruts* cannot be considered as real chiefs (in the sense of having executive authority and rights to tribute), let alone as "kings." There is a definite possibility that the highland Me'en, when they were settling where the Banja still lives now, intermarried with the Dizi and took inspiration from the Dizi chiefly tradition. Also the present leader of the Bayti Me'en is a son of a Me'en father and a Dizi mother from the chiefly family of the Sai-kyaz chief.[23]

5. Conclusions

The above story of the migration of leading Tishana *komoruts* reflects an indigenous interpretation of the gradual emergence of an horticultural-agricultural mode of subsistence by the Tishana-Me'en people alongside agro-pastoralism. It "explains," by means of a personified narrative account of a father and his two sons, the unity as well as divergence in clan dispersal, location, and mode of subsistence of the Me'en ancestors and their present-day descendants. It also accounts for the specific nature of the contacts with native groups like the Kwegu and the Dizi, with which relations of patronage and cooperation and coexistence were built. It grounds the ritual leadership of *komoruts* and ascribes them mediatory powers (prayer for rain and fertility) to enable the Me'en to live, herd, cultivate, and reproduce in a new area.

In the past half-century, the influence of the *komoruts* in Tishana society has declined and has been more and more confined to the members of their own clan and their territorial group, i.e., the immediate "followers." The very nature of their

22 A puzzling fact is that the clan histories of "Tishana" and "Bodi" – while revealing a number of similar names – are substantially different: they cannot be "integrated" in one narrative of origins. This most likely reflects the rather diverse ethnic origins of both groups.

23 The Koli figure in the story is, however, still enigmatic. Although the story says Koli was a Tishana, there is no lineage or clan name of that kind among the Tishana. The name Koli may well stand for a Dizi group (perhaps: Kolu).

"authority" prevents them from being power-holders or major decision-makers for the Me'en community as a whole. In the revolutionary period (1974–1991), their role was ignored and bypassed, if not ridiculed and undermined. The *kos* of Banja was partly destroyed by political cadres, who did not understand, or had no patience with, the "ritual" (not political) role of the *komorut*. In the new structure of the *k'ebele* peasant associations, the latter had no function. Within this structure, new, self-made leaders emerged (although often relatives of these *komoruts*), addressing new concerns. The Me'en leaders recently installed by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1992) and later by the Federal Government (after 1994) are young men, educated in state schools and colleges, and have no connection with the *komoruts*.[24] However, the fact that new leadership positions have emerged in the community – in the future there will probably also be those within the Christian missionary structure – does not necessarily mean that the *komoruts* will completely disappear.[25]

To conclude, Me'en history has entered a new phase, which will again lead to a redefinition of oral traditions. Such a redefinition will, nevertheless, not "refute" the story presented above: seen against the information we have about Me'en history and migration, it remains a telling and ethnographically valuable reflection of an earlier phase of their history.

For support of research work in Ethiopia in 1988–1992, I am very grateful to the following institutions: the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Treub-Stichting for Research in the Tropics (Utrecht), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Science (KNAW), the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research in the Tropics (WOTRO, grant WR 52–610).

I also thank the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (Addis Ababa University) and its then director Dr. Taddese Beyene for institutional support during the years of my research on the Me'en.

24 The (appointed) Me'en member of the Council of Peoples' Representatives (the Ethiopian national parliament) is the school-educated son of a self-made local Me'en chief who has no hereditary *komorut* position but who came to prominence under the previous Ethio-Communist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. (He was then probably a member of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia.)

25 A curious incident, which may have had some effect on the Me'en attitude toward the *komoruts*, is the following. In a big meeting called by the new authorities in 1993 in a village in the northern Me'en area, I witnessed that a representative of the administration (a man with a Me'en mother and an Amhara father) seriously insulted the incumbent Banja, who happened to be in the area and had come to the meeting as an observer. In response to the insult, Banja stood up, cursed the area and predicted that drought and hunger would strike the area of the village the next year. In early 1994, the area was indeed struck by a serious local drought and famine.

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L'ancêtre revenu

Croyances et pratiques autour de la naissance chez les Seereer Siin du Sénégal

Simone Kalis

Les représentations culturelles qu'une société élabore en ce qui concerne l'origine et la nature de l'enfant vont déterminer la compréhension de sa façon d'être au monde et s'articuler à la manière dont il est accueilli, materné et soigné dans le cadre de la puériculture et de la médecine traditionnelles.

Concept embryo-foetal et représentation du nouveau-né

Le nouveau-né est au croisement d'une union biologique et d'une alliance lignagère. Il comporte une part d'ancestralité. Au Sénégal, la jeune fille quitte sa famille pour rejoindre celle de son mari dans laquelle elle vivra. La résidence est de type patrilocal et le transfert de l'épouse est lié au versement par le jeune homme de la dot qui