

Keeping the Birds at Bay in the Bay Area of Somalia

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I

Although as indicated in previous publications (Lewis 1966; 1969), the southern agro-pastoral Somali apply the pervasive Somali distinction between men of god and (warrior) laity (*wadaaddo iyo waranleh*) less rigorously than their northern pastoral countrymen, this nevertheless remains a fundamental principle of role attribution (usually rendered in the Bay region as *warshidde iyo waranshidde*).

Here, as elsewhere in Somalia, men of god are essentially viewed as mediators and intercessors in domestic, socio-political and religious contexts. Both among the pastoral nomads and among the Bay cultivators, their duties may include rain-making (*roob-doon*). But, as reported previously (Lewis 1966; 1969) throughout the southern Somali tribes with their heterogeneous clan composition, the most regular occasion for rain-making ritual is the annual clan (or tribal) collective solidarity ceremony, typically led by the « first-born » segment (rather than by a man of god) which is the structural equivalent amongst the northern nomads of the annual commemorative ritual (*siyaaro*) in honour of an eponymous lineage ancestor. This is usually held at a traditional sacred centre, often the site at which the tribal founders are said to have assembled to form the original alliance establishing the tribe.

A more specialised local Bay region religious role, reflecting the predominantly agricultural economy, is that of demarcating and blessing plots of arable land by reciting chapters of the Quran — usually Suras 36 and 57 (the « *Yaasiin* » and « *Tabaarak* » — cf. Helander, 1986, 6)

A further specialisation, directly linked to cultivation, is that of protecting the crops from bird molestation (principally quelloes). In the Bay region, this is actually a monopoly exercised by the Reer Sheikh Muumin, a lineage of saints based at Bur Hacaba.

II

Sheikh Muumin's shrine lies a little to the south-east of Bur Hacaba, just off the old Bur Hacaba/Baidoa road near a large baobab tree. The shrine which has been reconstructed at various times consists (at least in 1962) of two buildings. One contains the tomb of Sheikh Haran Madare; the other that of our eponymous saint, Sheikh Muumin and the grave of his son Sheikh Nuur. This is a significant

religious assemblage since the Reer Sheikh Muumin seem to have supplanted the Haran Madare as preeminent religious figures in the Bay region about the time of the famous Ajuraan sultanate which dominated the lower Shebelle region in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Haran Madare are represented in all the Somali oral traditions known to me as a branch of the saintly Walamogge lineage descended, according to the same resources, from the famous Sheikh Hus-seyn Baliale — the patron saint of the Islamic population of Ethiopia (Andrzejewski 1975; Braukamper 1977; Lewis 1980). Local tradition associates the expansion of the Elai clan confederacy with its three main divisions (the « three stools ») from Baidoa to Bur Hacaba with the active support of Sheikh Haran Madare and his sons, Sheikhs Nuuriye and Adan (buried beside Haran Madare). The latter are credited with having outwitted the tyrannical (Oromo) local ruler, « Geedi Babo », whose infamous deeds and final overthrow figures so prominently in Bay Oral tradition (cf. Bono, 1930; Cassanelli 1982, 123). The latter appears in some traditional accounts as the local agent of the Ajuraan sultan.

However this may be, the transfer from Haran Madare's religious hegemony to that of the Reer Sheikh Muumin would appear to coincide (perhaps fortuitously) with the collapse of the Ajuraan sultanate. Whatever the actual historical circumstances (possibly involving religious rivalry), the transition between the two religious regimes is represented as a smooth, harmonious process. Haran Madare, himself, is said to have prophesied the coming of Sheikh Muumin who, I was told, was in comparison to other saints « as the moon is to the stars ». In common with many other saints, Sheikh Muumin had the capacity to fly. His origins, however, remain more obscure than those provided for Haran Madare. The most impressive account is that reported by Eugenio Bono (1930) who describes Sheikh Muumin as the (patron) « saint of the Elai ». According to this the saint's mother (Asha Osman, of the Iska Shatto clan) was impregnated by a divine spirit and nine months later gave birth in Mogadishu to Sheikh Muumin 'Abdille' (« God's slave »). After studying the Quran and completing his religious studies in Mogadishu, the saint was transformed into a bird and flew off to the land of the Rahanwin. He flew first to Bur Heibi where he was chased away as a bird of ill-omen and encountered the same hostile reception at his second port of call, Bur Jejis among the Helleda. He then flew to Bur Hacaba where in contrast, he was warmly received as the saint whose coming had been foretold by Haran Madare. The saint then resumed his human form and received abundant gifts of livestock and cloth, promising, in return, to help the Elai with his divine grace. Three specific requests were made: to achieve victory over the Wardai (Oromo) to desalinise wells and to drive away the birds which molested the ripening crops. All these he successfully accomplished. After other prodigious feats in Lugh and Mogadishu, Sheikh Muumin returned to Bur Hacaba where he died at the age of forty-seven years in 1773 according to Bono's informants. The same source gives the nineteenth day of Shaban as the annual commemoration festival (I was told the ritual was held on the 18th day of that month).

III

As far as I know, the earliest contemporary European reports on the Reer Sheikh Muumin are those of the Italian explorer Robecchi-Bricchetti (1899) and

the pioneer explorer-official Ugo Ferrandi (1903). The latter describes them as exerting powerful influence in the Bay area, extending to Lugh, based on their reputation for sorcery and the evil-eye. By these means, according to Ferrandi, they exacted tribute, exploiting their ancestor's sanctity to impress ignorant people. In the same vein, Ferrandi also reports a derogatory myth of origin (frequently used by the Somali to discredit groups) according to which the Reer Sheikh Muumin descend from Hawiye holy men who disgraced themselves by eating fish during a famine!

Ferrandi's negative view is consistent with his attachment to the people of Lugh whose religious settlement at Bardera had been under attack (unsuccessful it seems) by the Reer Sheikh Muumin.

In any event, Bono's more favourable account (1930) tallies with what I found at Bur Hacaba some thirty years later. The Reer Sheikh Muumin, marrying endogamously and split into three sections, were dispersed in small settlements at Mogadishu, Lugh and Bur Hacaba with a total population of about a thousand souls. According to Sheikh Muhammad Amin, the lineage's « *Capo-Qabiila* », the Reer Sheikh Muumin as a whole were adherents of the Qadiriya' *tariga* and the eponymous saint had lived twelve generations previously (this is consistent with Bono's 1930 report of eleven generations).

The specialised crop protection rituals are conducted as follows. Each year, the head of the lineage posts an individual member of the group to sit in a small house (*aqal*) beside the Baobab tree, close to Sheikh Muumin's tomb, to read the Quran from beginning to end to prevent birds attacking the crops. When the new spring growth is a few inches high, the *Capo-Qabiila* visits the Elai chiefs and tells them whom he has designated to read the Quran in that season. The nomadic tent (*aqal*) is built by the Elai, each of the three Elai sections (or « stools ») taking it in turn to provide this facility (in 1962 when I was there it was the turn of the Geedafadde). The duty Sheikh stays for three months in the hut reading the Quran and Elai farmers bring him supplies as *siyaarro*.

On the day that construction of the reading house begins, an ox and a sheep are sacrificed. When the building is complete but before the saintly reader takes up his position, each of the seven Elai chiefs — so I was told — produces an ox for slaughtering. When the Sheikh enters his house to commence his work he is given three cows as a personal reward — one from each of the three Elai « seats » (i.e. clan sections) as well as being supplied on a daily basis with milk and or ghee. The Quran is then read, according to my informants, twice for each of the three Elai « seats » and once more (a seventh time) for the clan section responsible for building the house in a particular year. In keeping with the myth of the saint's initially hostile reception by the neighbouring Helleda and Eyle, although these clans come « for blessing » the Quran is not read for their fields: this is a privilege accorded only to the three Elai « seats ». The seven readings correspond, of course, to the general value of the figure seven in Islamic cultures (as for example in the duration of the marital « honeymoon » rather than honeymoon) and more specifically to seven-day rain-making ceremonies conducted by Sheikh Muumin (cf. Helander, 1984).¹

¹ Helander's discussion centres on the legendary rain-making expertise of Sheikh Muumin whom he describes as a Sufi saint of the « Salihya Order » who died some twenty years ago. Muumin is locally and understandably popular name, and it may thus be that Helander is referring to some

IV

Thus, in this southern cultivating region in addition to the routine intercessory and mystically productive roles of saints (including rain-making) elsewhere in Somalia, we find a regional specialisation — crop protection — reflecting the requirements of the local economy. Although they appear to remain unreported in the literature, it would seem likely that other saintly families must be expected to provide similar protective services in other cultivating districts and I have heard of at least one instance of this in the north-west (Borama District) where cultivation is, of course, much more recent (Ahmad Farrah, personal communication). It seems logically consistent with their reputation as mystical « scare-crows », that the farmers of the Bay area should also look to the Reer Sheikh Muumin to control the time of harvest. According to my informants, the crops should not be cut until farmers have reported to the incumbent sheikh that the grain is ripe, and he has authorised that the harvest should proceed. Thus, through blessing the earth and those who labour on it, facilitating the rains, protecting the growing crop, and regulating the time of harvesting, in mystical terms the Reer Sheikh Muumin certainly seem to control production and reproduction in the Bay Region. According to the local ideology, the mystical efficacy of the Reer Sheikh Muumin depends directly on the *baraka* of the saintly eponym (virgin-born according to the myth recorded by Bono) which is tangibly displayed in the votive-offering strewn shrine and tomb itself juxtaposed with that of the earlier mystically charged Haran Madare. Since celibacy is not a pre-condition for fecund mystical power in this context, and indeed the sexuality of saints is extremely highly charged, I am not convinced by Bernard Helander's (1984) ingenious structuralist argument that sexual abstinence releases mystically charged energy to fructify the crops whereas human growth is promoted by sexual activity in the absence of religion. In the local view again, whether through the grace of Sheikh Muumin or other mediators, religious blessing is ultimately a precondition for successful human reproduction. Infertility and other reproductive disorders are amongst the commonest motives which bring people to Sheikh Muumin's shrine in search of blessing. No wonder the tomb is so festooned with votive-offerings — promissory strings, threads, pieces of cloth and even (when I visited it) two razor blades symbolising the supplicant's intention to kill an ox for the saint once his petition for fertility had been granted. Of course, at a more abstract level, I would argue that, universally, human sexuality provides a powerful prototype for the release of transcendent mystical energy (cf. Lewis 1971, 1977).

other personage than the founder of the saintly Reer Sheikh Muumin. Indeed in 1962 I met a widely respected religious figure living in Wafdai village, near Bur Hacaba, called Sheikh Muumin Abdarahman who described himself as a member of the (Salihya-related) Ahmadiya/Rashidiya order.

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