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The Culture of Accommodating Diversity Embedded in the Sufi Saint Cult of Bale, Ethiopia: A Historical Overview

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Abstract

This article examines the tradition of tolerance to diversity embedded in the Sufi Islam of Bale based on a historical study of observation of muudaa festivals, archival, oral and literary sources. It is aimed at suggesting some cultural values on tolerance to diversity for administrators and policymakers to consider and to scholars to augment it. Findings of primary and secondary data analysis show that the early Islamic practices, which eventually led to the emergence of the Sufi Saint Cult, incorporated elements of traditional religious practices of societies of the Bale region. The muudaa practice for instance was an Oromo religious practice of pilgrimage to the Abbaa Muudaa, the spiritual father of the Oromo, which later changed to its destination to shrines of Islamic Sheiks. Similarly, some practices of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity are also blended with Sufi Saint Cult practices. Consequently, followers of indigenous religions, Islam and Christianity of any linguistic, ethnic, geographical, and economic background participated in the Sufi Saint Cult. This led to the development of a typical culture that accommodated diversity. Such cultural values embedded in Sufi practices of Islam; therefore, have immense potential for tourism and to solve problems on divisive activities propagated by radical groups. Though some aspects of tolerance to diversity continued to prevail to the present, however, there are emerging threats against it.



1. Introduction

In Ethiopia, all of the three great religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam had a history of coexistence with indigenous religions of the various societies in the period following their respective introduction. Hence, syncretism of some elements of indigenous religions of various societies into their belief system had happened (Braukämper, 1992, p. 194). They also influenced the pre-existing indigenous religious beliefs and practices. In terms of religious identity, such syncretism was the target of purist moments and discouraged by such religious nationalists. Consequently, the significance of such intermixes of spiritual cultures for promoting social interconnection remained little studied, particularly in peripheral areas like Bale (Semu, 2016, p. 63).

The article; therefore, deals with religious traditions that were tolerant to diversity, which has given less attention hitherto on the account of radical clerics' persistent campaign to undermine them. It is also aimed at shedding some light on diversity tolerant practices that continued to prevail interconnecting various religious, economic, and social groups and playing a vital role in the peacebuilding process. Lastly, it tries to allure how nowadays cultural practices that accommodate unity within diversity could emulate significant options for policymakers and governors who have been counting the cost of divisive activities of radical groups in contemporary Ethiopia. This is a historical analysis of the tolerance to diversity embedded in practices of Sufi Islam, which pragmatically faced the challenges of pre-Islamic religious forms and founded a concrete foundation for contemporary Islam. It is a qualitative interpretation of evidence conveyed in data obtained from literary, oral, and observation surveys during over a decade of study in Arsi and Bale since 2007. In the study, 20

key informants (male=17 & female=3) were purposively selected.

2. Sufism: Origin and Its Features

There are interrelated views about the origin of the term Sufi, which is the root of Sufism. First, the dictionary definition of Sufi is a member of a Muslim group, who strives to become united with God through prayer, meditation, and by living a simple life. Next, a source suggests its origin be the name of significant figures related to the early days of Sufism. The first person was Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi, who founded the *Sufiyya* (a group) and led it for a time in the 9th century. The *Sufiyya* was formed based on the Egyptian Coptic tradition of monasticism and had claimed divine inspiration for commanding the good, prohibition of the bad, and attacking the ungodly. The other person was Ibn al-Sufi who later led the same group in Egypt (Fage and Oliver, 2008, p. 533). Yet, a clue to the origin of the term Sufism is an Arabic word *suf* meaning wool, which was used for the garment of Islamic scholars, who wore it such that it continued to represent their prestigious position in Sufism over time (Fage & Oliver, 2008, p. 559).

There are two interrelated views about the origin of Sufism. First, Cerulli (1972, p. 78) stated that Muslim mysticism was founded by Mansur al-Hallaj of Iraq, where Christian mysticism made itself felt in Islam in the 8th century. Secondly, Fage and Oliver (2008, p. 533 & 549) stated that Sufism originated in Egypt in the 9th century and spread to the rest of North Africa later. Corruption under the rule of Umayyad Caliphates and infiltration of Coptic Monasticism into Islam might have led to the concept of personal communication of man with Allah (God). Thus, one sugges-

tion states its origin in North Africa while another proposes it to the Middle East. In both views, Islam had the influence of Christianity and personal yearn and love for Divinity, which is an aspect of human spirituality (Cerrulli, 1972, p. 79).

Sufism has been characterized by an Islamic mysticism that teaches the integration of Islamic principles, intellectualism, and unorthodox practices that governs the lives of believers. The followers of the Sufism orders perform rites and erudite that differ not only from place to place but also from the *sunnah* (example) of the Prophet. It is a religious system in which the spiritual life of Muslims focuses on prayer, meditation, and rites of prayers as its key manifestations (Trimingham, 1971, p. 150-2; Shillington, 2005, p. 6). Secondly, Sufism underwent three paradoxical stages of development that characterized it to be both progressive and degenerative at the same time. These stages are meticulously observed by Trimingham (1971, p. 68 & 101-3). In the final stage, new foundations were formed in *tariqa* lines, branching into numerous 'orders' and fully incorporated with the saint cult. The cult of Saints, an important feature of Sufi communities with a viable degree for their founders to be venerated, is the most bitterly opposed feature of Sufism by the *Wahabbis* (Lewis, 1955, p. 595).

A universal feature of Sufism was its syncretism of elements. Sources approach this feature differently ranging from progress to decaying within the belief system. Braukämper (1992, p. 200) considered this as part of religious development that was caused partly by

the progressive disintegration of the orthodox Islamic cadre under pressure from the socially, culturally, and politically dominant indigenous religion. This means syncretism was caused within Orthodox Islam itself. Conversely, Simon Digby observed that such development can happen even within Sufism eventually. As he puts it: "Sufi tradition is perplexed and dismayed by an obfuscating growth of crude beliefs relating to saint worship, by a variety of activities and preoccupations quite different from those described in manuals of the mystic path" (Digby, 1973, p. 136). So, mysticism manifested itself in Islam as Sufism, which was characterized by pantheism as the key antithesis of Islamic *tawhid* (the unity of God) mainly before the 12th century (Shillington, 2005, p. 7). However, this syncretism has been a vital aspect of all "higher religions of the World" in the Ethiopian region (Braukämper, 1992, p. 194-95).¹⁷

The last feature of Sufism is the doctrine of the path to God. Sufism observes the *turuq* (the way to righteousness, the way to God) based on the belief that knowledge of God and truth can be found through prayer and meditation than by reason and senses (Lewis, 1955, p. 590). The *dhikr* (services) is considered by Sufi Muslims as a religious tent aimed at *ma'rifa* (absorption in God). Religions are systems that include various elements, whereas each of these elements like religious tent practices performs specific functions which contribute to the functioning of the system as a whole intending to solve particular problems peculiar to society (Braukämper, 1992, p. 195). Mysticism as a system of *ma'rifa*, therefore, finds a haven with Sufism.

¹⁷ He stated that some elements of higher religions of the World (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are syncretized into each other. Each of them also absorbed

from indigenous beliefs as well. So, it is not peculiar to Islam.

3. Some Prominent Sufi Saints of Bale and Their Role in Social Interconnection

3.1 *Sheik Hussein Sheik Ibrahim, His Miracles and the Rise of Sufi Cult in Bale*

Sheik Hussein is one of the most celebrated figures in the history of Islam in Ethiopia. *Sheik Hussein Sheik Ibrahim Sheik Abdullah* was an Islamic *wali* (godly man), who was the pioneer to bring the Word (Quran) to Bale. Sources show that the *Sheik* was born at Anajina,¹⁸ a site of his shrine also known in *Afan Oromo* as “Dirree Sheekanaa Hussein” (the plain of *Sheik Hussein*), which is located in Bale Zone, Oromia Region (Semu, 2016, p. 65). Though his birth date is controversial, written sources show that he was born 800 years ago (Braukämper, 2004, p. 83)¹⁹, but, oral sources tend to date him back to the early times of the introduction of Islam into Ethiopia. The life time of *Sheik Hussein*

is dated to 29 generations ago, when he converted the people of Bale to Islam.²⁰ This makes Bale a hub of early Islamic culture in Ethiopia mainly due to the roles of the *Sheik*.²¹ Besides, he is venerated as a native of Bale, who paved the way for his people to Islam. Written sources show that Islam reached Bale before the 14th century and its Islamic culture was firm before its conquest by king Amdä-Tsiyon in 1332 (Salviac, 1901, p. 39²²; Huntingford, 1965, p. 129).²³ This is in line with the 29 generation saga.

In Bale, the *sheik* was known as doer of miracles and prophecies future events. There are a number of miracles associated with *Sheik Hussein*. One is stone statues of horsemen warriors in the posture of hurling their spears, who were charging to attack *Sheik Hussein*. He miraculously turned them into stone statues making a sign with his hand (Cerulli, 1922, p. 88).²⁴ In a related story, *Sheik Hussein* was believed to have fought on the side of Arsi worriers against the Shāwan invading forces in the 1880s (Cerulli, 1922, p. 90).²⁵

¹⁸ A legend about the origin of the name Anajina has it that one day *Sheik Hussein* was said to have taken a walk and on his way back to his Mosque, he heard of a strange noise and asked in *Afan Oromo* “who is there?” Then, the *Satan*, who was said to have been afraid of the *Sheik*, replied in *Afan Oromo* as “Ana Jinniidha” meaning “it is me *jinni (Satan)*,” which eventually transmogrified into Anajina. And to this day that gate of the shrine is called *Karra Jinni*- gate of the Satan. Eventually, the name Anajina came to be used as alternative name of the Shrine.

¹⁹ Braukämper is the first to cite *Rabi al-Qulub* that states the 29 generation saga and later researchers accepted it. *Rabi al-Qulub* is compiled in Arabic by *Haji Yusuf Abd al-Rahiman*, consists of legends and myths about him.

²⁰ Informants: No. 13, No. 14, & No. 10.

²¹ See Kefyalew (2016: 66); Informants: No. 13, No. 19, & No. 20.

²² Martial De Salviac stated that the Arsi Oromo of *Bali* were mentioned in Christian sources in the 1st C of the last Millennium. Braukämper stated that the name *Bali* appeared in Zagwe records.

²³ The “soldiers’ song” in honor of King Amdä-Tsiyon (r. 1314-1344) didn’t mention of *Sheik Hussein*. But, the presence of Islam at the time is clear from the name of Bali’s prince Ali, who was defeated by the campaign. *Sheik Hussein* is also not mentioned in the *Futuh* unlike the tomb cult. Yet, from the 29 generation longevity and his list as the 12th descendant of the Prophet, *Sheik Hussein* is dated to the 13th century which concurs Islam’s presences in the ‘soldiers’ song’. Thus, by 1532, the cult might not be fully developed to take his name far audible enough.

²⁴ Here Emico Cerulli stated that *Sheik Hussein* was said to have cursed the ‘Izz and Akmas people, who burned his *Zawiyah* to the ground. Consequently, the ‘Izz and Akhmas peoples were defeated and suffered in the hands of the Wargay, who were their rivals, for ten years. Then the rebellious groups submitted to the *Sheik* and asked him for benediction and undo the invocations which led to their subjugation despite their numerical advantages as compared to the Wargay. Then, the *Sheik* blessed and befriended them henceforth.

²⁵ These statues are found near Anajina and Mount Abu al-Qasim in Seru District of Arsi Zone. This

Three, the *Sheik* is reputed to have been favored by God in instant replies to his prayers. For example, there was a long debate on the lawfulness or otherwise of honey-mead in Bale in which the *Sheik* was challenged by Bale's people, who hesitated to abandon their habits. Then, *Sheik* Hussein prayed "Oh God! Send someone who would arbitrate between us." Then, it was not long when a woman caring for a child joined them and asked the *Sheik* what she would do with 'the child she gave birth to from her son.' The story was that the woman was caring for her grandchild by her son, who drunk honey-mead and molested her despite her repeated crying "I am your mother, don't you know me." This happened in the presence of the man's wife, who was said to have shouted at him "come to me, I am here for you! Leave your mother alone." At the end, the *Sheik* asked the people of Bale "what is your judgment now?" That tells how God favored the pious *Sheik*.

The fourth miracle is a stone in shape of a donkey that was said to have been the *Sheik*'s donkey carrying luggage, when unfortunately the animal hit its master and instantly dried as the *Sheik* said cursing words. It is located not far from Robe town near Togona River, on which a natural bridge was created when the *Sheik* prayed to God to let him cross

the river.²⁶ Five, a vast marshy area in Sinana district was said to have been created when the *Sheik* needed water to pay the *zhur salat* and stroked the ground by his *dhanqee* (spiritual stick) in the name of God (Hussein, 2005, p. 30).²⁷ Six, at Anajina there are a number of features miraculously created by the *Sheik*'s prayers of which one is a greenly pond known as Dinkure, which has been used by custodians of the shrine as *zemzem* (holy water) and never diminish in sized ever since despite the hot climate of the area.²⁸ Moreover, there are many quotable sayings,²⁹ dream analyses (Settegn, 1973, p. 9)³⁰ and exemplary personality traits of the *Sheik* that have been cited as spiritual role model for his followers.³¹ Therefore, *Sheik* was venerated as a godly man while already he was alive, which led to the rise of his cult after he passed away. These traditions have made him famous in the region (Cerulli, 1971, p. 420-40).

Lastly, *Sheik* Hussein is known as the icon of Bale and its Islamic culture because he had produced many disciples, who later became saints (pl. *awaliya* or *waliyi*) and established their own teaching centers (Hussein, 2005, p. 32-33).³² He taught Quran and *Hadith* to tens of thousands at Anajina, where he established his *zawiya*, built mosques and a *madrssa*, in which *darassas* from every major "tribes" of

Mount might be the one that caused dispute between the *Sheik* and the Akhmas which the latter gave it to the *Sheik* after the deal.

²⁶ Informants: No. 13, No. 14, & No. 3.

²⁷ Informants: No. 13, No. 10, & No. 12. As to traditions, *Sheik* Hussein needed water for midday prayer while he was on voyage. Then he speared the ground by his walking stick and at a time created a vast marshy land.

²⁸ Informants: No. 1 & No. 13; A *baaroo* by Artist Adam Ahmed known by the title "Anaajiyoo" consist of prose praising *Sheik* Hussein for his miracle of filling his lake without the rain.

²⁹ In a piece of advice on the benefit of self-reservation, the *Sheik* was said to have advised his pupils: "your tongue is like a lion inside yourself, if you let it loose it will destroy you, otherwise it bring you honor" (Eshetu 1973: 10).

³⁰ See for spiritual interpretation of about the dream Sof Omar had once as mentioned below.

³¹ *Sheik* Hussein was said to be a reserved man, spoke little, generous and well-travelled in and around Bale.

³² Bale has many shrines which were established by its *awaliya* and observed by their adherents. These include Anajina, Sof Omar Cave, Hamarra, *Sheik* Ibrahim Jamal, Amir Nur and many *ujubas* (grave sites).

all over southern Ethiopia were said to have attended him for a term of six months. His teaching institution was also called *Ziqtum*.³³ Among these Sof Omar, *Sheik Ibrahim*, Abu Nassir, [Abu Sufiyan], *Sheik Logomo* and [Ali Maye], who are the renowned Sufi Saints of Bale, were his disciples (Settegn, 1973, p. 8; Østebø, 2005a, p. 27-28). His son *Sheik Ahmed bin Hussein* was chosen as *khalifa* (successor) after the death of the former. Thus, teachings of *Sheik Hussein* and his history have been popularized by works of his disciples, who ensured the continuity of Bale as the hub Islamic history and culture.³⁴

In sum reputation of sheik Hussein as the pioneer Islamic *wali* in Bale and his miracles persuaded a diverse people to adhere to his cult. The cult evolved as a blended multicultural and multi-ethnic in which elements of the diverse components represented in its practices.

Gloss

Sof Umaroo isin beekie harqootaanii

3.2 Sof Omar *Sheik Mohammed* and His Role in Social Interconnections in Bale

Sof Omar is the most venerated Sufi *wali* in Bale next to his teacher, *Sheik Hussein*. His full name is Sof Omar *Sheik Mohammed Sheik Sayyid-nur*.³⁵ Sources are inconsistent concerning his birth place, genealogy and clans claim descent from him (Settegn, 1973, p. 8 & 10; Braukämper, 2004, p. 32-36).³⁶ Oral traditions state that Sof Omar was born at place known as Hamarra, one of his shrines, where his tomb is located (Nasha, 2009, p. 1).³⁷ Hamarra shrine is located some 30 kilometres from Jarra Town, the capital of Gololcha District of Bale. But, Braukämper (2004, p. 156) observed that Sof Omar originated from Tigray and died at Hamarra (Østebø, 2005b, p. 33).³⁸ But, the idea of Tigray origin of Sof Omar is not supported by oral sources in which he is unanimously cited as elder brother of Makida, the mother *Sheik Hussein*, by many clans native to Bale.³⁹ This is clear in the following hymns in praise of Sof Omar runs as:

English

Sof Omar, I recognized you by yokes

³³ According to my key Informant, a senior expert in cultural heritage at Bale Zone Culture and Tourism Office, the word *Ziqtum* is an acronym of Arabic words *zawiyah* (home of *Sheik*), *Qtulaba* (home of *DarassaI*) and *Madrassa* (school). The detail on its dating needs archaeological investigation.

³⁴ Oral tradition refers to *Sheik Hussein* by many names. Two of these names in *Afan Oromo* are *Nuura al-Allah Baalee* -meaning the Allah's light of Bale due to the story of his birth and *Sayyid al-Arafina* meaning our righteous lord. But, unlike Sof Omar no clan has claimed descent from him.

³⁵ His name is spelt in the sources variably as Sof Omar, Sufi Umar, Soph Umar and Sof Oumer. I think Sof Omar, both words as first name, is more convenient. He was a *Sheik* like *Sheik Hussein* but usually

cited without it. A clue to this is that the prefix 'Sof' is said to be given to him due to his vast knowledge of the religion and local laws.

³⁶ Sof Omar is connected to *Sheik Hussein* as the former is a favorite disciple and uncle of the latter.

³⁷ Informant: No. 13. Hamarra is the name of his wife, after whom a Mount on which a shrine located was named.

³⁸ Østebø stated that "some traditions stated that Sof Omar originated in Tigray" but did not clarify it.

³⁹ Informant: No. 13. A clue lays in Sof Omar's nick name *Luka dheeroo*, a man of distant origin, in the folk.

*Makidaan isinitti aanti dhatootanii...*⁴⁰

Moreover, previous researches cite Makida as the sister of Sof Omar (Braukämper, 2004, p. 132).

The second inconsistency in the sources is whether Sof Omar lived as contemporary of *Sheik Hussein* or not. Written sources state that Sof Omar was a favorite disciple of *Sheik Hussein* (Settegn, 1973, p. 8-10; Cerulli, 1971, p. 455; Braukämper, 2004, p. 30-32; Østebø, 2005a, p. 29; Østebø, 2005b, p. 33-34). This indicates that he lived in the times of *Sheik Hussein*. But, according to informants who claimed to have descended from Sof Omar, their saint lived about 20 generations ago teaching Islam at the cave, named after him (Østebø, 2005b, p. 33-35).⁴¹ So, the inconsistency here is that how Sof Omar, who lived 20 generation ago could live at the same time with *Sheik Hussein*, who lived 29 generations ago. This shows a gap of some 250 years between the times the two saints of Bale had lived. Moreover, descendants of Sof Omar state that their ancestor was the 15th descendant of the paternal uncle of Prophet Mohammed.⁴² Even this implies a gap of three generation and the sister Sof Omar cannot be a contemporaneous of *Sheik Hussein* (Abdella, Tolosa, & Gezahgn 2011, p. 11).⁴³ Moreover, *Rabi al-Qulub*, a book of legends

Makida is your younger sister....

of *Sheik Hussein*, does not mention of Sof Omar (Braukämper, 2004, p. 130-132).⁴⁴ Though the feature of Sufi *awaliya* to claim *sharifite* descent also holds true for both saints of Bale, the genealogy of Sof Omar seems to have been not well thought out unlike that of *Sheik Hussein*.⁴⁵ So, it is difficult to date both to the 13th century.

Yet, there are three basic reasons for the wide popularity of Sof Omar in Bale. First, unlike *Sheik Hussein*, there were (are) many clans in Bale who claim descent from Sof Omar. Braukämper listed four of these clans namely, Hawaxu, Shakamara, Shankora, and Çamarri. While Østebø listed six clans including the Aymaro, Ilani, Dawwe, Sheidama, Garjeda, and [Karanle] as his descendants, which he suggested might be transmogrified denominations of the former list (Braukämper, 2004, p. 132; Østebø, 2005a, p. 29).⁴⁶ Yet, my study on oral data of the area indicate that the Aymaro, Ilani, Dawwe, Sheidama and Garjeda seem likely descendants of Sof Omar while Karanle clan is of the Somali descent who entered the area as *magntaa* of the Dawwe clan.⁴⁷ These clans claim custodians of Sof Omar shrines, *sharifite* descent and privileged status in Sufism tradition of Bale. For instance, Braukämper

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, the same *baaroo* was collected by Areba, Wondifraw and Abel (2003: 12).

⁴¹ Informants: No. 1, No. 13, No. 4, & No. 6.

⁴² Cf. with that of *Sheik Hussein*'s 12th descent saga p. 7. Based on generation longevity, Sof Omar and *Sheik Hussein* lived before 550 and 800 years respectively. This shows *sharifite* calculation of Sof Omar is inaccurate.

⁴³ They listed the genealogy of Sof Omar as: "Binu Abi Talib (paternal uncle of the Prophet)→ Ali→ Hussein→ Zein al-Abid→ Abdella→ Salih→ Isa→ Abubakar→ Omar→ Musa→ Barri→ Kardaliy→ Aliy→ Mahdi→ Sof Omar. Note that AliQ and Aliy, from whom the two *Sheiks* of Bale descended are brothers.

⁴⁴ Besides, nothing is known whether the father of Sof Omar has migrated from Arabia and lived in Bale or not. It is also important to bear in mind the *luka dheeroo* and Tigray origin traditions.

⁴⁵ Informants: No 3, No. 13, No. 1. Braukämper analyzed the oral tradition at shrines of both saints based on *Rabi al-Qulub*. Thus, the claim about the contemporaneous of the two saints is hardly acceptable.

⁴⁶ Østebø's list contains clans inhabited the area but that of Braukämper live mainly in Gadab area.

⁴⁷ *Magantaa* (in *Afan Oromo*) and *magan* (in Somali), is a local institution of patronage for clan to settle either temporarily or permanently in their territory during times difficulties such as drought and famine.

observed that the genealogy of the Arsi Oromo clan known as Shakmarra, a corruption of *Sheik Omar*, who claim descent from Sof Omar, is to be found only 10-12 generation ago (Braukämper, 2004, p. 132).⁴⁸ Anyways, Sof Omar is a Sufi saint of Bale form whom many clans of the area claim descent.⁴⁹

Secondly, there were symbolic significances of Sof Omar in the Sufi Saint Cult of Bale. He was observed by adherents of Sufi cult as *Abba Murtii* (father of judgment) in matters concerning early congregations of Muslims. This implies that he seemed to have worked as chief *Qadi* (judge of *shari'a* law) of the time. He was known to solve disputes between clans at the time. Much of history of Sof Omar has been told in spiritual myths attributed to the rise of Sufism in the region as whole. One myth has it that God show his will to Sof Omar in visions and dreams which *Sheik Hussein* interpreted. One of it runs as follows. Sof Omar was on a tree which two persons were cutting, when he was trying to get down of the tree a lion come and sat on the way underneath. And when tried to climb up the tree, a serpent was barring his Way. Sof Omar told this to his master who was a known interpreter of dreams and visions. *Sheik Hussein* interpreted it as, “the tree was this world, a lion was grave, a serpent was a death and the two men were day and night (Settegn, 1973, p. 9).”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Based on genealogical calculations taking the longevity one generation at average of 27.5 years, the 10-12 generations longevity of Shakamarra clan would only be about 275-330 years ago, which date Sof Omar to the end of 17th or to the beginning of 18th century. Besides, *Ato Abdujabar Sheik Ahmed*, who was the *Abba Karraa* of the cult of Sof Omar in 2010, stated that he is the 18th heir to the seat in the line of *Sheik Sof Omar*.

⁴⁹ But, the fact why no clan so far has claimed descent from *Sheik Hussein* is invites enquiry. As the people

of Bale call him as “Our Father”, it seems as if no one was allowed to claim him in private.

Thirdly, Sof Omar is a *wali*, whose shrines are made of spectacular natural features, which has been interpreted differently. There are 210 shrines dedicated to Sof Omar in Bale alone. Four of these have extraordinary scenery. One is the famous Cave shrine of 15.5kms long, the second longest underground cave system in Africa, with eight specialized chambers of different values to rituals of the cult. Out of it’s over 200 entrances, only 42 are discovered so far. There are a number of legends about this cave. Some say the cave is a reward from God for Sof Omar’s surrender to his will. Others say the cave has been a natural protection for Sof Omar when his enemies tried to kill him for teaching Islam at the site. Few still claim that the cave was a place where Sof Omar concealed at the end of his life. That tells why Sof Omar unlike other Sufi *awaliya* did not have an artificial shrines (Braukämper, 2004, p. 156). Another shrine of Sof Omar is found on the top of Mount Hamarra in Wabé River Gorge. The third shrine is located at majestic waterfalls of the Welmal River, known as Sof Omar Welmal, in Dallo Manna District. The last shrine associated to Sof Omar is a shrine of waterfalls in Adaba district of the former Bale.⁵¹ Finally, the role of Sof Omar in Sufi saint cult of Bale involved his own family of which his daughter Ayyo Makko and his son Abdi are mentioned in the cult of Sof Omar (Kinadze et al., 1985).⁵²

of Bale call him as “Our Father”, it seems as if no one was allowed to claim him in private.

⁵⁰ Informants: No. 1, No 13. People make oath as *murtii Sof Omar* citing Sof Omar’s judgment by rising palm thrice in vow.

⁵¹ See NALAA, 1949, Report on rituals at the Sof Omar Cave; Informant: No. 13, No. 19. Some legacies of the cult of Sof Omar and why his shrines were located and associated with magnificent natural features will be the subject of further study.

⁵² The name of daughter of Sof Omar is mentioned in

4. Factors for the Sufi Saint Cult of Bale to Accommodating Diversity

4.1 Cultural Symbolism of the *Muuda* in Blending of Oromo Tradition and *Ziyara*

The present Sufi Practice of *Ziyara* had its origin in the *muuda* (pilgrimage to anoint). It has base in Oromo tradition to which both present Muslim and Christian Oromos have cultural attachment. *Muuda* was a spiritual journey of *jila* (envoys of each Oromo clan) to the *Abbaa Muuda* (spiritual father), who at the time of the Oromo Population Movement, was at his *galma* (temple) at Madda Walabu, near Gannale River in Bale. Some of the Oromo also refer to the *muuda* site as Haroo Walaabu (Salviac, 1901, p. 177-80; Braukämper, 2004, p. 143). *Muuda* involved various ceremonies at *galma*, where the *Abbaa Muudaa* (father of the anointment) performed prayer and send blessings back to his people through the *jila* every eight years. He performs *muuda* that is symbolized by putting fresh butter on the head of *jila* members in spiritual rituals. When the *jila* returned home, they were received warmly at the *Caffee* (council) by the *ayyu* (scholars), who interpret the messages of the *Abbaa Muuda*. The *jila* were identified by their unique dressings and signs and they were honoured and no one touch them even if they walk in the middle of a battle. Because, *muuda* was holy and pilgrims carry a stick with their stuffs on it and myrrh (*qumbii*), as tribute gift for the *Abbaa Muudaa* (Legesse, 1974, p. 9-10; Salviac, 1901, p. 180).

In time however three major factors that led to the decline of pilgrimage to *Abbaa Muudaa*. These were the expansion of the

Oromo far away from the cradle-land, the influence of Islam and the prohibitions of the *muuda* by the imperial and military regimes. But, few Oromo among the Borana and Guji, who remained near the cradle-land far enough from the eyes of the state with their indigenous religion were able to continue their pilgrimage to *Abbaa Muuda*. Above all, the expansion of Islam in Bale after the 1530s made it difficult for the Oromo to conduct the *muuda* freely. Thus, these factors led to the emergence of new *muuda* sites. In Bale, such sites became Islamic shrines that blended some *muuda* rituals with the Sufi Saint cult (Braukämper 2004, p. 35; Østebø, 2005a, p. 29). Consequently, the cult of *Sheik Hussein* has combined early traditions, Islamic teachings, myths and miracles (Braukämper, 2004, p. 141-145). Trimingham (1952, p. 256) also elucidated that the cult is an amalgamation of Sufi Saint Cult, the Mecca pilgrimage ceremonies and *Abbaa Muudaa* rituals. Such rituals were commonly practiced in Arsiland up to 1950s.⁵³ Legesse (2000, p. 185) also observed the continued *muuda* practice among the Islamized Barentuma Oromo. Similarly, Aguliar (1994, p. 762) reported that a ritual practice combined with the cult of *Sheik Hussein* has been practiced the Waso Borana in Kenya.

After veneration *Sheik Hussein* in a Sufi cult in his name therefore pilgrimage to his shrine continued with original Oromo term *muuda*, while its Islamic equivalent is *ziyara*. In time, the *muuda* to *Sheik Hussein* shrine grew popular accommodating people of different backgrounds. It was symbolically called “Mecca of the Poor” to denote its attendance

the source written by the foreigners as *Ayiew Maco*. Its meaning is wrongly interpreted as *Maco* to mean name in *Afan* Oromo. But, the chamber devoted to her and her role in the cult of Sof Omar show that it is to mean *Ayyo* meaning mother in *Afan* Oromo, and

Makko is a Muslim name that connotes the holy city of Islam i.e. Mecca, localized as *Makko*.

⁵³ He states *Muuda* practices at *Sheik Hussein*, is similar to the cult of Sof Omar and pilgrimages to other shrines.

by low income Muslims who could not afford to travel to Mecca to perform Hajji Prayer. It also became the key practice of Islamic sainthood cult that involves singing of *baaroo*, dances and ceremonies at shrines, where the *wali* was born or had taught or his burial tomb was located. Pilgrimage to Dirre is the most valued spiritual duties of adherents of the cult.⁵⁴ Pilgrims from all over northeast Africa, mostly from different parts Oromia and Ethiopian Somali and few from Gamo Gofa and Wollo flock to Dirre. A large number of pilgrims visit such sanctuaries during pilgrimage seasons (Trimingham, 1952, p. 253). The number of pilgrims is usually higher during the August *ziyara*, which was estimated to 100,000 in 1971 (Braukämper, 2004, p. 141).

Gloss

*Gannaalee Yaa Gannaalee, Gannaalee
Gannaalee Aqisnaa Ariifa Baalee*⁵⁷

The *baaroo* also connotes metaphorical representation of *Abbaa Muudaa* to the Oromo people a role which after sometime Sufi Saints particularly *Sheik* Hussein have inherited. *Baaroo*'s oral art attracts a number of Oromo pilgrims. It also reflects a

Gloss

*Asalaam wa'aaleekuum abbaabbaa
Yaa Nuura nuurii dhalootaa
Anaajinaan galma aadaa
Seenaa ilmaan Oromootaa
Ariiba keenya dachaanee*

⁵⁴ He observed that *gariba* is an Arabic term meaning guest. Thus, *gariiba Sheekanaa Huseen* means guest of *Sheik* Hussein but it is often used in its short form as *gariba*.

⁵⁵ Informants; No. 13, No. 14, No. 10. In 2007, on the occasion of the *hajji* pilgrimage, the Third Ethiopian Millennium Celebration at the level of Oromia Regional State was held at Anajina attended by about 500,000 people among whom were the top officials of the regional and federal governments.

But, in 2007 the number of pilgrims during *hajji ziyara* was very high due to a special circumstance.⁵⁵

4.2 Baaroo: an Oral Art Embedded with Accommodation of Diversity

An artistic practice in the cult is the singing of melodious songs in praise of Sufi saints like *Sheik* Hussein and Sof Omar, known as *baaroo*.⁵⁶ It is an allusive diction in honor of the saints and Allah. There is a clue about the origin of the *baaroo* from the *muuda* pilgrimage to the *Abbaa Muudaa*. A couple of verse for instance shows the metaphorical symbolism of *Abbaa Muuda* with the Gannale River, where the home of *Abbaa Muudaa* was located. It runs as:

English

Gannale, you Gannale, Gannale
Gannale Our father the best of Bale

symbolic significance of Bale to the singers as seat of *Abbaa Muuda*, which served as a key pre-Islamic cultural centre of the Oromo. The following verses of the *baaroo* shows the cultural value of Anajina as follows:

English

Peace be up on you our father
You the Light, whose birth lights
Anajina is the temple of culture
of the descendents of the Oromo
We returned back again to your shrine

⁵⁶ J. Hussein wonderfully traced many Arabic terms in the cult of *Sheik* Hussein. As to him "*Baahroo* is a loan word from the Arabic *bahar*, meaning sea. For the Arsi, "sea" is used as a panegyric reference to *Sheikh* Hussein. It symbolizes the perceived imminence of the saint's generosity, benevolence and bounty. Historical records and legends indicate that *baaroo* was first inspired by the Sufi movement in the region."

⁵⁷ *Baaroo* by Artist Jamal Shale, Volume 6, track Number 6, no year of publication.

*Mee harqootaan nutii kootaa...*⁵⁸ Please come to us in our vision....

They also *Sheik* Hussein encoded as their father and the pride of Bale in the following *baaroo* as: Adherents also encoded *Sheik* Hussein as the “father of all the Oromo” and “the pride of Bale” in popular diction in his

Gloss

...Abbakeenya waamana Huseen faaya Baaliyyoo
Raabii keessani jedhaa gadi hindhiisiinaa aadiyyoo
*Badheessa uumaateenaa dhumtii teessan Abbiyyoo*⁵⁹

Baaroo is also embedded with valuable historical information that shows the cult has been used as ideology of resistance against Ethiopian governments (Braukämper, 2004, p. 123). Lastly, *Baaroo* accommodate diversity and has been sung by people of different

Gloss

Allahu maraam Abbiyyoo
Xaqaallaloo kiyyahoo
 Xaqaallalii fixii hajaa tiyadoo...⁶⁰

In the above hymen, the first underlined word is Arabic, the double underlined in the second line is Amharic and the remaining are accents of the Oromo and Somali languages. During the rituals at speakers of different languages feel excited by instant songs and dance emotionally. Pilgrims sing *baaroo* in various melodious lyrics, hitting drums, dancing and asking for alms in the name of *Sheik* Hussein on markets or from door to door or at their camping sites by nights. The sound of *muuda* pilgrims is often heard from a distance.⁶¹ Thus, the Islamic saint cult in Bale has contributed a unique musical culture of Oromia

honour despite a clearly known tradition about his *Sharific* descent from Arabia. These are shown in *baaroo* verses composed as:

English

We call ‘Our Father’ Hussein ‘the pride of Bale’
 For the sake of God don’t forget the cult
 for grace of the heavens our end is on you [Dad]

ethnic or language backgrounds as a common practice of the cult unite them all. The wordings of poem in *baaroo* show mixture of Arabic, Oromo, Amharic and Somali languages.

English

May Allah is merciful to our father (*Sheik* Hussein)
 You are mine who holds all together
 please fulfil all wishes in my heart....

and Ethiopia indicating its extraordinary masterpiece of human heritage (Semu, 2016).⁶²

4.3 Inter-Religious Festivals: Cooperation of Muslims, Indigenous Believers and Christians

The Sufi saint cult of Bale is known for its remarkable tradition of tolerance to diversity, which has never been capitalized on. This culture of accommodating diversity allows the participation of people of different reli-

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Baaroo* by Artist Jamal Shale, Volume 6, track Number 6, no year of publication.

⁶¹ Informants; No. 13, No. 6.

⁶² *Ibid.* NALAA, 1949. Archival materials report the unique social significance of Sufi Cult of Bale, which was given by the government security and health follow up during annual festivals and its tourism potentials were proposed for future development plan.

gious, ethnic, socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds in the major practices of the cult (Ahmed, 2010). Followers of indigenous religion participate in *muuda* and *baaroo* due to cultural symbolism the tradition had in connecting to the society to their ancestral memory. They usually visit sites of the present Sufi shrines due to the belief that they were once been cultural centers of their ancestors. They also respected the tradition. The shrines of Anajina and the Sof Omar cave were believed to have been used by traditional believers before they were dispossessed by the *Sheiks* after whom they are known at the present.⁶³

As discussed in the case of *muuda* and *baaroo* above, followers of *Waaqeffannaa* (the Oromo indigenous religion) practiced several elements of their belief system in less structured forms side by side with formal Sufi religious practices. *Irreechaa*, the Oromo traditional thanks giving ceremony, for instance was practiced by putting fresh grass at key landforms and water bodies both on the way to and from the Sufi shrine on *muuda* routes and at shrines. And this is still on practice. Shrines like Anajina, Sof Omar Cave, Hammarra, many site on Bale Highland Mountain Peaks were said to have been centers of traditional beliefs before long time (Nasha, 2009, p. 2). Moreover, several Oromo socio-political centers like the Madaa Walabu, Oda Roba, Tullu Nama Durii (hill of the ancient man) or Kardul, Malkaa Amaanaa (ford of peace) on the Welmal River, Malkaa Wakkannaa (ford of oath) on the Wabé River and *Malkaa Aananii* (ford of milk) on the Gannale River were among famous *irreecha* sites. Many people therefore still pay rituals at these sites on the *muuda*

way to or on their way back from shrines of Sufi saints (Semu, 2020, p. 34 & 48).

Nazri and *Silat* are interrelated practices that connected Muslims and Christians participating in Sufi Saint Cult. *Hadra* is a ritual performed in camping sites in localities where large number of adherents of the cult live (Braukämper, 2004, p. 117). It paved the way for *nazri*. People who can't partake in the *muuda* for various reasons would send pillage called *nazri* (among Muslims) or *si'ilat* (among Christians). In *hadra* rituals adherents contribute *sadaqa* in kind or in cash. *Hadra* has been accompanied by festivities in which adherents, who got their prayer rewarded and their *nazri* accepted give their witness about holiness of *Sheik* Hussein. *Nazri* is an offering for *Sheik* Hussein in return for their problems solved or their health restored. As to Informants before the introduction of purist movements in Bale after 1990s, there were colourful *hadra* ceremonies a month before the *ziyaras* (Semu, 2016).⁶⁴ The practice was common during the imperial period, declined during the *Därg* and becomes rarer or even halted in large towns in the incumbent regime (Abdella et al., 2003, p. 4-5).⁶⁵

Followers of Christianity participated in the *muuda*, *baaroo*, *nazrii* and *sadaqaa* due to cultural attachment to the old *muuda* pilgrimage and belief in values of scared sites where shrines are located presently. Even there is belief that Anajina was a Church site before it was replaced by a mosque (Salviac, 1901). Besides, many practices of the Sufi cult such as bonfire (*waziza*), drinking of *zämzäm* (holy water), *nazri* (called *si'ilät* in the Christian tradition) and *muuda* are much related to

⁶³ See the story of war between the followers of Sof Omar and "Borana" over the site as indicated in *baaroo*.

⁶⁴ Informants: No. 13, No. 20.

⁶⁵ Informants; No. 13, No. 11, No. 15; Field Observation, 2012 at Sof Omar Cave.

Christian rituals. The *muuda* by itself looked like pilgrimage to holy monasteries found scattered throughout Ethiopia. At most Sufi shrines, there has been water used by pilgrims as spiritually valuable “holy water” for medicinal purposes. This invites Christian pilgrims to participate in the belief that God use every resource in his possession wherever he wish to solve problems faced believers. Practice known as *waziza* (bonfire) which is similar to the Orthodox annual festivals of *dāmāra* (bonfire for founding of the true cross) attracts many Christian pilgrims. These cross-religious practices therefore allows the participation of followers of different religions usually in less structured way side by side with formal Islamic Sufi practices like *solat* prayers at the shrines.⁶⁶

The way of life the custodians of Anajina known as *darga* and the tradition of tolerance of diversity are significant cultural heritage of the cult. The way the *darga* live in their eleven villages in and around Anajina has been an attraction by itself. This way of life is comparable with the way of life of monastic communities in several monasteries of Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Anajina shrine was described in as “monastery” by Emperor Hailā-Sillassié and a land was entrusted to it as *fife* with annual salary to Imam of the *Sheik* Hussein Mosque (Semu, 2016: 93). The *darga* have been curators of the sanctuary and its holy objects witnessing their devotion to the *Sheik*. Their life activities are bounded by spiritual norms of the cult. Though originated from different areas, they use to live in harmony. Economically, they depend on cattle breeding, by retailing goods

and providing services to pilgrims (*Addis Zāmān*, 1962 E.C. [1970]).⁶⁷

Moreover, when pilgrims landed at the sacred shrine, they perform *hadra* ceremonies using objects left behind for them by the *Sheik*. The uncommon mutuality among pilgrims and tolerance to diversity embedded in the cult is the most significant heritage of the cult (Braukämper, 2004, p. 122). This included the custom of *sadaqa* (alms like food, water, money and shelter) to the pilgrims simply in return for blessing and goodwill. Pilgrims also share logistics, treat the sick and bury the dead. Adherents, who can’t conduct the *ziyara* contribute money and in return ask to pray for them or send them with *nazri* to the holy site. This tradition of tolerance enabled Muslims, Christians and traditional believers to participate peacefully in the cult. This is also evident in Christian tradition of *tsäbäl* (holy-water), where the sick including the Muslims attend seeking for cure in many sites. They are not asked to convert to Christianity and the same is true when Christians or *Waaqeffataas* (followers of *Waaqeffannaa*) who make pilgrimage to Anajina. This is the key aspect of religious tolerance in Ethiopia, which I believe never been taken seriously by social scientists (Semu, 2016; Hussein, 2005).⁶⁸ But, dependence of the *darga* on the gifts of pilgrims and their openness to strangers has been exploited by political groups and extremists, who jeopardized the tolerance embedded in the cult (Braukämper, 2004, p. 123) but this needs further study.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Ibid* ; Field Observation, 2019 at Sheik Hussein *ziyara* in August.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

⁶⁸ J. Hussein observed that Sufism is known for its elasticity and overt eclecticism. Simplicity of rituals

and modesty of demands are the other characteristics of Sufism in Africa.

⁶⁹ Informants; No. 16, No. 1, No. 6. They remember how some groups who fight the *Därg* hideout there in 1980s.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Diversity is deeply entrenched in practices of the Sufi Cult of Bale, which emanated from absorbing pre-existing traditions to attract the local populations and eventually won their heart rather than imposing orthodox Islam. This led to a gradual replacement of the *muuda* journey of the Oromo *Jila* to *Abbaa Muudaa* with the *ziyara* to the shrines of Sufi *Sheiks* (Islamic clerics). In both *Waaqeeffannaa* and Sufism, the old and the new coexist. Some communities, who adopted Christianity through time, also recognize the Sufi tradition as the heritage of their ancestors. Sufi *sheiks* were respected as fathers by most local communities around Sufi shrines and their adherent elsewhere. Consequently, diverse ethnic groups such as the Oromo from all corners of Ethiopia and northern Kenya, the Somali from Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia, the Sidama, Halaba, Afar, Harari, Selti, and Amhara particularly from Walo as well as expatriates like Yemenis, Arabs, and Iranians partook from the cult of *Sheik* Hussein in particular.

Sufi cult practices, which evolved mainly due to the teaching of *Sheik* Hussein and his disciples, have been known for their accommodation of diversity regardless of the socioeconomic backgrounds of their participants who view the cult as a common culture. Practices such as the *muuda*, *baaroo*, *sadaqaa*, *hadra*, *nazri*, *lilata*, *waziza*, customary activities such as drinking of *zemzem*, eating of *jawara*, passing through Aynagenyi Cave hole, and the carrying of *hanqee* symbolizes devotion to the Sufi cult. They have been credited for the inclusive participation of interested adherents as well as tourists. This practice also promoted socioeconomic and cultural interconnections of the diverse societies for a long time. The Sufi Cult therefore

is embedded with cultural values which celebrate diversity. It apparent therefore that this cult could cement social interrelationships by outmanoeuvring separatist tendencies at the present time when multiplicity of conflicts affected the daily lives of societies of our country.

Based on the discussion hitherto and aforementioned concluding remarks, it is vital to recommend to the rank and file of governors to exemplify these traditions' accommodating diversity to discourage divisive activities of separatist groups. Governors at all levels also should exploit these indigenous tolerant traditions to heel fault lines threatened by emerging radical ideologies. Moreover, the administrative and legal officials should enforce justice for crimes against the constitutional right of adherents of Sufi Islam to ensure their freedom to pursue the belief of their choosing (Semu 2016). Also, policy-makers should be designing proper policy frameworks that would capitalize on such indigenous cultures promoting diversity. Lastly, the academic should prioritize viable research and studies focusing on this subject. Higher Education institutions should also fund competitive research projects on this area and organize different platforms to disseminate findings to augment the efforts of administrators and provide scientific choices for policymakers.

Declarations

Conflict of interest, author declares that there is no competing interest.

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