

Politics, religion and space. About places of mediation and sacred space among the Gurage of Ethiopia

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Abstract

The main faiths among the Gurage of Ethiopia – Orthodox Christianity, Islam and autochthonous polytheism – provide a constellation of integrative principles for territorial and descent segmentation. Religious leaders and ritual specialists of the three confessions have always represented the unity of Gurage tribes facing the outside world and still receive tributes of cattle, sheep, goats, honey, ensete, money etc. The ethnic court of justice of the Gurage, the *yejoka*, has re-dimensioned its office, in order to prevent the rise of central instances within the process of political mediation between juxtaposed lineages and territorial segments.

The article focuses on the identification and institutionalisation of sacred places among these tribes, the places where the *personae*, the lineages and residential groups interact within the self-representation processes of Gurage society. The theological and liturgical pluralism, practised by the three faiths, confirms the Gurage's capacity to answer to the many and contradictory stimuli of modern society, of market economy, of political, administrative and territorial transformation which takes place in the world. This religious plurality in a single family, in a single person, unveils religion as an answer, or rather as a structure of satisfactory answers.

Keywords: Gurage, polytheism, sacred place, trance cult, lineage

I. The Gurage: some ethnological notes

Socio-political and economic context

The Gurage inhabit a relatively vast region situated south-west from Addis Ababa. This large ethnic group (almost seven million, according to the 2007 National Census) is highly inurbated today. It is more inurbated than any other ethnic group in Ethiopia and it is widespread all over the national territory, and abroad.

Trade and agriculture are the main economic activities. Regional, national and international trade of almost any kind of goods, but particularly of technology, clothes and highly requested consumers' goods, including alcohol and legal drugs, allows the Gurage to keep their capillary presence in all the market places of the country, from the peripheral markets up to the central market of Addis Ababa. At the same time and consequently, the areas concerning services related to trade (book-keepers, accountants, drivers, carriers, etc.) count on a strong Gurage presence.

The second economic activity is agriculture, particularly the cultivation of ensete, the so-called false banana.

Ensete ventricosum is a monocarpic monocotyledon cultivated in the Ethiopian highlands, in Uganda and in many other African and East Asian states. The Gurage manage to extract – following their traditional cultivation techniques – up to 100 quintals of edible material per hectare. The starch crop obtained after processing is a nutrient paste with a delicate flavour which lends itself to various preparations. The plant is attacked by few parasites and does not present cultivation problems. By-products are textile fibres. Ensete should and could be far more widespread than it is today in Africa, in other countries and even in Ethiopia since it represents a great opportunity to solve or at least to reduce the problems of food scarcity and famine arising in many areas and to work in harmony and continuity with the traditional institutions of cultivation and culture.

Two main difficulties have prevented the diffusion of this food crop:

- a) Technological difficulties: 1. According to the tradition, women are in charge of the processing of pseudostem, roots and leaves as well as of the scraping and squeezing procedures. It is done by hand with rudimentary tools, although the design (in progress) of a low-cost device would not imply a great effort and would improve the yield. It would also facilitate the task for the women which is presently very hard, and thus contribute to the diffusion of the ensete; 2. The paste undergoes a fermentation process which makes it edible and pleasant to taste. This process, which has not yet been studied, could be improved in order to preserve the quality and taste of the end product; 3. The distribution follows traditional channels and has not, up to now, been taken care of. Processed ensete – called *bulla* or *koccho* by the Gurage – has no packaging and cannot, therefore, be stored and distributed as it is: only recently has there been an attempt to sell vacuum-packed *bulla*;
- b) Cultural difficulties: 1. It is considered as the specific food of some ethnic groups that are involved in agricultural activities in the Southern highlands and, consequently, as the food of the rural areas: food for the poor; 2. In the urban areas, it is by the cultural elite snubbed as food of the past, food which is not modern. It is not associated with the idea of progress.¹

The cultivation of this plant, its distribution and consumption, strengthens the Gurage ethnic identity in contraposition to other ethnic groups, which belong to the same linguistic family (the semitic language group of the Amhara, Tigreans and so on) but have a quite different mode of production – ploughing agriculture, political centralisation, state administration. Actually for the inherent agro-botanic cycle (transplantation time, growth of the plant, harvesting time and so on), this specific cultivation allows peculiar migratory movements with mass returns of the Gurage

¹ Knowledge of the context and integration in the local social network both speak for the interest showed by the local groups for innovation in the frame of tradition. Innovations and new images can finally be exported and re-discussed in adequate contexts.

men during the harvesting season and their presence during the contemporaneous and corresponding religious feasts. November, December and January are in fact the acme of a very important period of religious festivities such as the *chist*, dedicated to Bozha, one of the main Divinities of the Gurage pantheon.

Actually the cultivation of ensete, common to all the groups, has facilitated and allowed a peculiar social and political structuration of the Gurage world, which is organised in territorial segments that are the spatial expression of the kinship orders, i.e. the expression of time and space. In the Gurage Region, the segmentation of the agnatic descent group, i.e. the clan and lineage, coincide to a great extent with the segmentation of the territory.² But even in the big city, where intensive exchanges take place, the Gurage seem to re-propose the model of the spatial relationships order which had already been elaborated in the rural world.

“Merkato” area in Addis Ababa is one of the largest market places of Africa. In this place, permanently inhabited by hundreds of thousands of people, during the day intensive economic transactions take place. There, the Gurage manage to re-propose their own political and social structure in the context of market economy and in a wider national and international economic context, which is continuously changing. If this process is eased and allowed by a particular form of agriculture, the cultivation of ensete, it is also true that it is actually their peculiar political organisation of lineage segmentation to allow the elaboration of such a flexible answer which is also congruent with the new occupational opportunities.

The Gurage distinguished themselves in three main groups (subtribes): Soddo, Silte and Sabat Beyt.³ The latter is further divided into many “houses” (*beyt*) or clans. The main seven “houses” or clans are: Muher, Ezha, Chaha, Geto, Ennamor, Endagagn (Aklil), Gumer, (Maqorqor; Wallani-Woriro).

Each “house” or clan is divided into lineages, agnatic groups of descent which identify themselves *de jure* and *de facto* at least partially with territorial units:

² This has already been shown in several ethnographic accounts. See, for instance, Shack 1966 and Palmisano 2008a, 2008b.

³ The Silte are a group which had been included as part of a larger “ethnic” composite in transitional (as earlier) mapmaking and which finally won separate recognition at the end of the last decade: «In April 2000 the Federal House finally agreed to reconsider the case. Eventually it was agreed that the issue be resolved by referendum of the Silte *weredas*. The vote, held between 18 and 26 April 2001, was overwhelmingly for Silte autonomous administrative status. The zone was set up forthwith, and within a year, EPRDF had published in English a lengthy *mea culpa*, for the way in which it had attempted to frustrate the ‘will of the Silte people’, in its new magazine *Tehadso*». (Vaughan 2003, p. 265) Silte is now the name of the population and the new zone which represents them; Silti is the name of one of the *woreda* in the area.

Territorial and administrative terms in State and emic perspective	Descent terms in emic perspective	Descent terms in etic perspective
1. ego version region zone (<i>awraja</i>) district (<i>woreda</i>) [village group] village [group] [part of] village household (<i>jagar, yagre, gwala</i>)	Gurage nation main group <i>beyt</i> <i>t'ib</i> <i>infocha</i> <i>abarus</i>	tribe subtribe clan lineage lineage lineage
2. <i>qicha</i> version (a.)	<i>kifla</i> <i>t'ib</i> <i>hizb</i>	sub-people clan sub-clan
3. <i>qicha</i> version (b.)	<i>t'ib</i> <i>monebiya</i> <i>mechebiya</i>	clan house/lineage house

Integrative principles of territorial segmentation and descent: religion

There are three main religious movements (streams), or faiths, among the Gurage: Orthodox Christianity, diffused among the Soddo in the north; Islam, which is particularly diffused among the Silte in the east;⁴ and the ethnic religion, actually a third faith, found mostly among the Sabat Beyt, in the centre of Gurage country.

The Orthodox Christian Church of Ethiopia had a considerable economic and politic power in the past. Its influence on the policies followed by the Abyssinian empire was considerable and exerted through emperors, kings or *ras* that felt close to it or feared it for its charisma. And this is above all in the rural area, where peasants had founded their system of production on land ownership which was legitimated and supported by the Orthodox Church; the Church was in its turn supported by peasants and emperors. This allowed the Church to expand its presence up to the rural areas, even to those most remote from the imperial centres of power. In this sense, the Church has propagated the culture of the centralised societies of Shoa and northern regions of the country to the societies with quite different political structures, such as,

⁴ The Sufi brotherhood of the *Tijaniya* is much followed.

for instance, the Gurage. The Church has been adequately repaid for its efforts by the central power with the concession of privileges and many land rights, especially in newly conquered regions. The Church entrusted, in the past, the plots of land to the farmers through the institution of *rist*.⁵

Islam was also among the Gurage for centuries. In its progressive expansionist movement from south to north, namely from east to west, starting from the coasts of Somalia, through the Bale region, and then further north, Islam spread among the Gurage probably between the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Islam also in Ethiopia spread from north to south, from the Red Sea coasts, in more remote times; but the Gurage have eventually become familiar with it through Cushitic societies from south, as well as through Gurage religious figures, who had earlier travelled for trade in countries where Islam was widespread, and then visited them again to study that religion. As a religion, Islam has had, in Ethiopia, the advantage of presenting itself without social and political blames: it had neither had any kind of relationship with the imperial power, nor with the various attempts to centralise the region. In the same time it was, and still is, a religion which allows a dynamic attitude toward many kinds of commercial activity and not only in the sphere of agriculture.

The Gurage are Muslim and Christian but many sections contemporarily practice the traditional faith. Guided by the motto «religion is a personal matter while the country is a collective matter», the Gurage believe that there are no differences of thought among Christian and Muslim Gurage so strong as to prevent or create difficulties for any activity concerning the administration of the territories and the sections. One often encounters deeply religious Gurage, who follow a syncretism of the cult. Or, more precisely, we often find a contemporaneity of the two religions, of the two faiths, lived by the same person without feeling dichotomic tension, without perceiving contradictions in the creeds. Each of these two religions, and even both of them together, can cohabit in the same person together with the third faith, i.e. a differentiated and complex series of ritual activities, with all the emotions and the affective potential generated through it.

⁵ The *rist* is an institution which regulates the access to land exploitation rights. Land is considered to belong to the emperor, or to the Church, and the nobility with the concession of the emperor who detains the *imperium* on land. The access to the land rights exploitation was hereditary and interpreted as a renewal of the client and servitude relationship established among the farmer and his descent, on one hand, and the lords of the latifundia – by appointment of the emperor – or the Church, the nobility, the institutions of public, religious and administrative power on the other hand. The farmer paid his tributes to the representatives of the authority, in natural products – mostly cereals, such as *t'ef* but also honey, beer and so on – or in service, such as *corvée* work to the convenience of the institutions, and not so often with money.

II. Gods, rituals and leaders

The Gurage pantheon in its territory

The third faith, the autochthonous religion, is a polytheism in whose pantheon three main Divinities, Waq, Damwamwit and Bozha, are flanked by the Supreme God, Yegzar, creator of the world.⁶ These Divinities provide a good representation of the relationship between Gurage society and the rural, agricultural world, from which it is originary.

The believers of the traditional religion built a temple called *waq zagar*, in which they celebrate their rituals. These sanctuaries are built in forests of juniper trees. The rituals are led by men who belong to ancient lineages of specialists which are today commonly called *abak*, a term derived from the Amharic *abba*, “father” used by the Orthodox Christians to indicate the priest. The ceremony and the procedures of their ritual performances are quite impressive, abounding in sacrifices in such a way that the *yejoka*, the territorial court of justice of the Gurage, had to intervene to limit the number of animals, mostly calves, which were slaughtered.

The cults’ celebration, in honour of this pantheon, take place in the forest. The forest symbolises the world of nature as seat of the extra-social and extra-natural world, while remaining close to the village which is the most immediate expression of the world of men, i.e. of the social world and its culture. At the same time, the Gurage pantheon wholly expresses the social relationships that take place in the Gurage society, and, still more, expresses its interiority, even the intimacy, of the Gurage society’s attitude towards itself and towards the world. The forest is indeed the place of the preservation and conservation of Divinity. In the forest, which is situated between one village agglomeration and another, between one *t’ib* and another, yet always in the heart of the territory of a *beyt*, there stands the place *par excellence*, the seat of the sacrifices, of the hecatomb.

The three main Divinities, for whom sacrifices are made, are difficult entities who make man endure great sufferings.

1. Waq

Waq is an uranic Divinity, which manifests itself in the shape of a comet, celebrated during the yearly festival of *chist*. Waq is the warrior spirit: «Each clan has his own Waq, with a specific name. For the Chaha, Waq is *awagayt*; for the Ennamor, *jeber*; for the Aklil, *yemuarar*; for the Ezha, *engeber*; for the Geto, *mandwa*; for the Endagagn, *samar*; for the Muher, *iyasus*; for the Gumer, *ajet*», according to the Geto Gurage. Each temple dedicated to Waq, the *abwaqyar*, has its guardian, the *ye zahre dana*. The office connected to the guardianship of the Waq cult is inherited through

⁶ For some Gurage, these Divinities are not autochthonous, above all Waq, but also Bozha and also Damwamwit, considered to be originarily from Shoa.

male descent, and the manipulation and the interpretation of the oracles in case of war is always done by men. The Waq sanctuary is also guarded by its ritual spouse, the *ye wagapacha damam*. The *damo nida*, a ritual specialist, makes a selection from virgin candidates for this office, one of whom is selected and considered the *de jure* a kind of spouse of Divinity and the *de facto* wife of the *damo nida*, an hereditary office in the patrilineal axis among the Chaha, in the subclan of the Monamama.

The main celebration of the cult, the *chist*, takes place from November to December, at the temple situated in Chaha land, on the territory of the Mazuhur clan, where Waq takes the name of *awagayt-Waq*.

2. Damwamwit

Damwamwit is a chthonic Divinity, Goddess of fertility, probably “mother earth”, celebrated during the *senche*, the main ritual dedicated to her.

The *senche*, the cyclical yearly ritual, associated to health and physical well being, is organised in highly institutionalized groups, presumably vestiges of the age class system, groups which were the expression of the past social structure of the Gurage. During this ritual, the female Divinity appears as a thaumaturgic Divinity, opening the way to an apotropaic cult. *Senche* involves the inversion of roles, showing women yelling all kinds of insults and only one man as the major officiant, the *ye way damam*, who directs the women’s performances – the only occasion during the entire year, of male participation in the cult of Damwamwit. The main cult place is situated among the Chaha, close to the villages of Yabitarra and Mokerer.

***Samer*: skull and arch of the door as sacred places**

The *Samer* ritual can only be celebrated by a woman who has given birth to at least her eighth child. In fact, the *samer* can take place in occasion of the eighth, tenth or twelfth child born from the same couple. The *awgered* gives a precise definition of what must be done: she is a seer, with red dyed hair that is never combed, and she directs all the ritual and liturgical steps which have to be taken by the woman. To start the ceremony, the woman’s husband has to purchase either a sheep or an adult cow and all the relatives must be gathered. As many children as those born from the woman are invited from the neighbourhood (for the eighth child, eight children are invited, for the tenth, ten children and so on...). They all sit quietly in the house. A full plate of *wusa* with *ketfo* and cheese is given to them with a handful of butter smeared *qollo*. During the night, men eat *ketfo* with *asheshat wusa* (a particularly delicate and precious quality of *wusa*). The woman, who has given birth to the child, dresses with “Abyssinian” clothes, which are considered to be particularly elegant for the day of celebration, and not with traditional Gurage clothes; she obviously smears herself with fresh butter. She receives presents from the guests, honey, butter, money etc.

The next morning she prepares the *dapa*, the *zumamojat* and the *asheshat* for the *adoto qahwa* ceremony. The name of this ceremony literally means “the coffee for *adoto!*”. It is considered to be of Muslim origin: the ceremony in which, according to the Gurage, the prophet Muhammad celebrated the birth of his first daughter Fatima. Only the women drink this coffee together with eating some of the toasted coffee beans.

The final phase of the ceremony then takes place. The skull of the cow slaughtered the previous evening is scarified and then cut horizontally at the level of the jaw, so as to leave intact the two horns; it is then smeared with a great quantity of fresh butter. The cow skull prepared in this particular manner, a unique social and existential situation (the certifying of the birth of many children, i.e. of a wide descent), is the *q'an*, the symbol of the descent group, i.e. of the ancestors, which will become the object of a cult by all the future great grandchildren. The *q'an* is hung to the *zapa* (*yechba*) inside the house, among Muslims, or to the *enfocha*,⁷ among Christians, and set in a bamboo cane, which is then wrapped in blankets. Prayers are addressed to this symbol of the unity of the descent group. It is addressed in the feminine, both verb and adjective form.

***Ye enfocha mwyet*: beads as sacred place**

The *mwyet* is a bracelet and a necklace, and, at the same time, the name of a ritual.

The *mwyet*, seen as a celebration of the family, which is carried on every month throughout one's life, can start on the same occasion as the *samer*. For the occasion, the mother of many children purchases many different beads of various colour and fixes them on a thread whose length is twice the width of her wrist. She then takes this bracelet and keeps it in a small straw container (*agalgal*). All the daughters and the wives of her sons prepare a *mwyet* in a similar fashion, with beads they buy on their own and which they then mix and fix on a thread to make bracelets. They will then be kept all together wrapped in ensete leaves (*qetar* type leaves). The blood of a slaughtered cow which has been stored is then poured onto a clean plate, the *taba*, in which all the armllets will now be dipped and left to soak for a whole night, kept behind a curtain. This is the same curtain which protects the intimacy of the married couple, the wedding ceremony and some other ceremonies of particular meaning to the family (*megareja*). The day after, all the *mwyet* (the bracelets) are washed in boiling water. *Enkache* is then prepared – thick barley flour which is boiled in water and seasoned with pepper, butter and salt: “it makes life sweet!”. At that point a huge quantity of extra butter is added, and *mwyet* will be kept in this butter the. All of this is placed in a wide clay plate, the *sera*. The *mwyet* will then be left in the butter for half a day, after which they will finally be placed on the *q'an*; only then

⁷ *Enfocha* means lineage or descent group, as well as “arch of the door”.

do the women start praying.⁸ At the end of the prayer the paraphernalia are put away: the *mwyet* are dipped in the *yeqwot* (a dish of cabbage, salt and urea, “limestone powder”) and then, without being washed, they are placed back in the *agalgal* until the next year; the *q’an* is hung back to the *zapa*, where it will also remain until the next year. In the following summer, i.e. the second year, and thus for all the following even number of years, the *q’an* will be removed from the *zapa*, set on the floor onto ensete leaves, *enqache* and *yeqwot* will be prepared again, prayers will be said following the *da’wa* mode etc. On the third year, and during all the uneven numbers of years, the slaughtering of an animal will enforce the above-mentioned ritual, and the blood of the victim will be used to strengthen the *mwyet*, which will again be soaked in it. And thus forever, as long as a family can recall. It is, in fact, believed that if the ceremonies are not performed on the appointed time, the *mwyet* – embodiment of the lineage spirit, kept by the women: *mwyet* as sacred place – will disappear. There is the risk of extinguishing the presence of the spirit by leaving the *mwyet* out of beads: «It will leave, to some other place, and the family will be forever abandoned», say old Gurage women. The women take care to pray for the well being of the family, for its unity, addressing their prayers to the *q’an* adorned with the colourful *mwyet*.

***Ye t’ib mwyet*: butter as sacred place**

All the relatives belonging to the same *t’ib* meet together,⁹ ask for the advice of a *shogura*, a witchdoctor and a seer, and raise the funds necessary for the celebration of the ritual. They buy a great number of beads and either a pregnant cow, the *worezo*, or a cow which will soon be inseminated.¹⁰ At the birth of the calf, which is ideally estimated to take place during the third year starting from the moment in which all the members of the *t’ib* have met and decided to perform the big *mwyet*, the *t’ib* meets again to discuss what has already been done. The calf will be slaughtered at the right moment, possibly during the month of *terer*. All the *mwyet* of the *t’ib* will be soaked in the blood of the calf. Women who do not attend this phase of the ritual will never be allowed to soak the *mwyet* in the same blood anymore. A kind of curse will hang over them: even if they are very wealthy, they won’t be allowed to buy with their own money that which is required for the ceremony of purification that they have to

⁸ Following the *da’wa* mode for the Muslims: reading of the Quran, religious songs, holy texts, continuous repetitions of the saints’ names of God’s attributes and so on.

⁹ The *t’ib*, which can correctly be called clan or lineage according to the political context, is the institution at the basis of the structuration of Gurage society: it is the juridical *persona* who detains the rights of ownership on the forest, *debir*, on the pastures, *haber*, on uncultivated land, *agere*, on the village as a whole, *jafwara*, on the main roads, *wur ema*; while individual private property concerning land is limited to the house and its orchard, *yaseden*, inherited by the son on the father’s death.

¹⁰ The ritual is meant to evocate and recall fertility on the lineage but through the feminine line. Is this a sign for a previous matrilineal organization?

perform as an expiation for their absence during a fundamental moment of the life of the *t'ib*.¹¹ They will have to beg in order to procure the money to buy enough butter and two containers, a small and a large one. They will have to fill the small one with butter for the *mwyet* and the large one with *ketfo* for the human beings. The woman who seeks purification and expiation will then prepare a *mwyet* which fits her wrist. If she doesn't manage to do everything on the same day, the size of her *mwyet* will only be so wide as to fit her thumb. She will then have to wait for the third year, or even the next uneven year, to repeat the ritual and try to obtain a *mwyet* of the same size as the others.

All the women can gather food, i.e. butter, for the ceremony. The *mwyet* will be soaked in this butter, and only women will be allowed to eat the food.¹² Before being soaked in butter and food, all the *mwyet* are tied together. A cow is then sacrificed. The left part, cut lengthways, is given to the men and the right part to the women. This part of the animal is used as food, and the butter, in which the *mwyet* have been soaked, is placed in its centre. A small quantity of this minced meat, the *deme*, is brought to the homes of elderly women who have not been able to attend the ceremony.

The cult of *mwyet* is always connected to the veneration of the *q'an*. As a widespread Gurage motto says: «Wherever you find a *mwyet*, there is always a *q'an*».

Lemcha

When, among the Gurage, a woman gives birth to twins, a purification ritual is necessary. The birth of twins is in fact considered an unnatural and dangerous event for both the woman and the society as a whole. She thus has to follow the advice and the ritual and liturgical indications of the *shogura* in order to perform all the acts required to obtain purification. «Why has this woman given birth to twins?», the *shogura* asks the Divinity. It is a difficult question to which the *shogura* self will answer, interpreting Divinity signs and reconstructing a relationship of cause-effect. The cause will be identified in some error committed in the fulfilment of some ritual on the part of the woman or in some sin she is guilty of; a moral or ethic error. Once the cause has been identified, the *shogura* will tell the woman to do a *samer* and a *mwyet* ritual. She will not be allowed to ask for financial support from any of her relatives to organise these rituals; neither will she be allowed to receive presents during the ceremony. The money required will have to be procured through absolutely extraordinary means: she will have to wander and beg for a long time.

¹¹ In the actual moment of invocation and foundation of the presence of the Divinity, of the ancestors spirits, in the object which emblemizes the unity and connection of the lineage, a human member of the same lineage must attend. Here, the affirmation of religion as a thematic of presence reveals itself as absolute.

¹² All the women who know they cannot be present at the moment of the gathering of food and butter, take care to send a representative in their place with a sufficient quantity of butter.

3. Bozha

Bozha is a Divinity represented by thunder and celebrated during the *newar*, a kind of fire celebration which is found in all the Hamito-nilotic area. This ritual, at the core of the cult dedicated to Bozha, is celebrated twice a year, with a main feast during the month of *terer* (December) and, then, once again in the month of *amra* (June).

According to the myth, Yegzar, himself, entrusted Bozha with the responsibility to regulate Gurage's daily behaviour. There is only one Bozha for all the Gurage districts who protects the houses from theft and destruction caused by fire. The *shena*, a cross resembling the Greek letter "tau", represents this Divinity and is distributed to all the Gurage of the *sabat beyt*.

Gwetakuye is the name of the door-keeper, the guardian of the temple dedicated to Bozha. A very important mediator between men and Divinity, the *gwetakuye* also has an extraordinary moral authority and political influence among men. He is often invited to attend the sessions of the *yejoka*, the ethnic court of the Gurage. He is always chosen among the members of the *beyt* of the Ennamor, possibly from the clan Entezara, in patrilineal descent; when there are no adequate male candidates available for the position, it is given to a woman who is structurally closer in the patrilineage, providing she demonstrates to possess the quality required of a mediator. The *gwetakuye* is assisted in his activity by district representatives of his person in all the Gurage territory. They are called *maga*, and do not share all the rigid prohibitions and alimentary and ritual proscriptions (*shindar*) which weigh on the office of *gwetakuye*. He can, for instance, only eat one species of ensete, the *gwadra*.

When a lightning strikes a house and burns it, no one, besides the *maga* and the *gwetakuye*, can intervene. It is left to burn and the cattle that survive the fire are sacrificed to the Divinity, while the remaining property, pastures and orchards are forfeited and destined to increase the wealth of the sanctuary dedicated to the cult of Bozha.¹³

Religious leaders

Religious leaders have always represented the unity of the Sabat Beyt, namely of all Gurage, transcending *de facto* the tribal group of origin. Their office is recognised as such in all the Gurage territory; they receive tributes of cattle, sheep, goats, chicken, honey, ensete and money; they keep social order, i.e. harmony in the community. Their duty has been re-dimensioned by the institution of the *yejoka*, the ethnic court of justice of the Gurage, but it is still very much required today. Ritual responsibilities of

¹³ Here is the sequence: divine sign, dis-appropriation of man/confiscation, political-private de-territorialization, sacred-public re-territorialization.

the three main Divinities – Waq, Damwamwit, Bozha – have still a particular religious political influence and can lead a relatively more comfortable life thanks to those tributes and presents they receive on many occasions.

The political structure of Gurage society is segmentary. This implies that there are no central instances in it and that we are thus speaking of an acephalous society. The territory itself is segmented in units that coincide with kinship units. For the political segmentation through juxtaposed lineages, for the territorial segmentation and finally, for the co-presence of three different religions among the Gurage, the role of integrators and warrants of religious tolerance, played by the leaders of the three practised faiths, has always been of great importance for the determination of the cohesion and the ethnic identity of the Gurage.¹⁴

Therefore, it was actually expected of the religious mediators to be involved in the reintegration of the society and to strengthen the cohesion through their roles of careful intermediaries in all supernatural and social questions.

III. The ethnographic case

The great ceremony: Abreit *maulid*

Various religious feasts of Muslim origin are celebrated in the Gurage region. The main *maulid* are the Katbali *maulid*, in Wolkite (beginning of January), in which Sheikh as Sultani, who died in the beginning of the 90's, is venerated, the Alkaso *maulid* (mid January), in which Sheikh Ashraka al Kasuye is venerated, and the Abreit *maulid* (mid December), maybe the most anticipated.

Pilgrims and believers from all parts of Ethiopia, from Jimma, Sidamo, Addis Ababa, and “even from Saudi Arabia”, reach Abreit, in the heart of Gurage country. It is considered to be an excellent place to pray and “to obtain what you desire”. Lambs, calves, oxen and even camels – from the Arsi country – are slaughtered by the hundred in a great religious sacrifice and consumed in common by all the pilgrims.

Sheikh Budella was born in and resided in (Ezha) Abreit. This *maulid*, which is celebrated once year toward the middle of December, starts on a Saturday and lasts until the next Tuesday and is intended to be in his honour:¹⁵

¹⁴ On the other hand, some Gurage authors hold that the religious fragmentation could be considered as the cause of the social disintegration of the Gurage in the past: «Although political disintegration and social disorganisation were the characteristics features of the Sabat Beyt Gurage before Menelik's conquest of the region, religious complexities were one of the causes of this phenomena». (Gebreyesus Hailemariam 1991)

¹⁵ It concerns the month of *terrer*, in the Gurage calendar. This ceremony takes place shortly before the *newar*, the ritual dedicated to Bozha (it almost overlaps or anticipates it). I have attended this ceremony with Tekle Gebre, Tariqu and the others in 1994.

«Sheikh Budella did a lot for all the Gurage, for the Sabat Beyt, the Silte and also for the Soddo; he was a great counsellor for all the people who consulted him. Among his sons were Sidi Hussein, Sidi Nur, Sidi Anzar, Sidi Giti. One of his wives was the daughter of Abba Jiffar, the lord of Jimma. Many believe that he has not died but that he is only waiting to manifest himself again, when it suits him most to do so. He hasn't died during the "red terror"!».¹⁶

All the Gurage are involved in the cult of Sheikh Said Budella, also named *sheoch* in a simpler and more affectionate manner. Many miracles are attributed to him:

«Terrible things have happened here. Dead people have been brought back to life again, many blind have recovered their eyesight. Sheikh Budella was especially famous for returning eyesight to the blind.¹⁷ During the Italian bombing on Abreit, none of the bombs exploded. Sheikh Budella came back from Wollo flying with his whole body. Even plants and flowers are filled with emotion and move themselves during the prayer in his name. During these moments there are instruments which play without being touched by anyone, the *debe* for instance. Many take pieces of his tomb and use it as medicine. The spring of Auzemzem was created after he stuck his stick in the ground, a stick with an iron end. He was able to do any work on his own and to realise and make others realise many great deeds. Finally, he wrote many books before the Derg came to power. He was a great leader of all Muslims and among his many books there are: *Menakib*, *Kibrit al Ahmar*, *Iz 'hal Abdallah* and great quantity of *manzuma*, the psalms for the prophet and for Allah: *Salat al Nur*, *Salat Wagiza*, *Salat Asteisa*, *Muhibet al Anwar*, *Asrafal Astar*; and *Mizbah*, his major work».¹⁸

Sheikh Budella was born in (Ezha) Abreit, when his father, an Ennamor who belonged to the *t'ib* of the Entezara, had gone to visit friends with his wife, born in the Geto, more precisely in the *t'ib* of the Wezerat, to the Abidat family. As with all the Ennamor of Abreit, Sheikh Budella belonged to the Entezara *t'ib* of the Ennamor, i.e. to the *t'ib* in which the *gwetakuye* is selected. He was in fact a direct descendant of the *gwetakuye* of the Gurage and actually detained this office during his whole life.¹⁹

¹⁶ According to Sheikh Budella family members, this would have taken place during Mengistu's military repression known as "red terror".

¹⁷ To help to see how the world should be seen: to interpret.

¹⁸ According to Sheikh Budella family members.

¹⁹ The connections between the Abreit *maulid* ceremony and the *newar* in honor of Bozha are apparent also in the double position of *sheikh* and *gwetakuye* legitimately detained by Sheikh Budella and his descendants. It is as if Islam were seen in progression and therefore adopted as religious language for the Gurage re-territorialization of the world.

The father of Sheikh Budella, Said Bushra, was a Muslim who belonged to the Sufi brotherhood of the *Tijaniya* at the time of the Amhara conquest of the country. He was also known as Yeku Bakeka or Ba'u Sani and was the founder of the first mosque. His father was Said Ibrahim, the first person to convert to Islam in Abreit. Whereas his father was a Christian who also wore the title of *gwetakuye* within the Bozha cult and was a much followed religious leader of the Waq cult by the Ennamor, «... he was contemporarily Christian and practised both cults in the same place».²⁰ When his father died, Said Ibrahim inherited the title of *gwetakuye* and, with it, a small economic empire. According to the old transition rite of the Ennamor, and in order to inherit the title of *gwetakuye*, he jumped on his father's corpse and immediately declared: «I don't want anything from the wealth of the Christians». He, as such, refused more than a thousand cows which were his due and gave them to the poor. He began then to study the *sharia*, the Islamic law, very intensively; he acquired a deep knowledge in theology and started to pray and predicate among the Geto. He went to Abreit among the Geto everyday where there was already a mosque. Later, his son Said Bushra had two mosques built in the area, one close to Abreit but among the Chaha and the other with a *qubba* next to it – where he was buried, according to this will, together with his wife and the remains of his parents –, among the Ennamor, next to the temple dedicated to Waq, the Waq-*zägär*.²¹ Said Bushra also intensively studied Islamic law and theology, but in Wollo, with Dani Sheikh. When he returned home, he immediately found many followers, demonstrating his talent as religious innovator. At the beginning, he established, following tradition, the *maulid* during the month of the birth of the prophet, the *rabi'a al awal*; but after having observed the excessive rigidity of winter in the Gurage mountains, he moved the celebration to the month of *rajab*, a period in which «the Prophet already found himself in the womb of his mother».²²

Sheikh Budella also took care of giving «a better definition» of the laws of the *yejoka* through laws which he himself had elaborated, *al awar*. And even today, the central *yejoka* asserts from time to time that Abreit sanctuary «is a place that the Gurage need very much», as the door-keeper of the sanctuary tells and still discusses the interpretations of the books he has written. In the past, many men came to him to discuss important topics.²³

During the reign of Haile Selassie, these books which expressed the Islam of the Gurage were censored and therefore published in Saudi Arabia. Imperial power

²⁰ According to Sheikh Budella family members.

²¹ The *qubba* or mausoleum of Said Bushra, the father of Sheikh Budella, is situated in Abreit. Some days after the *maulid*, the mausoleum is opened and the visitors are allowed to enter and pray.

²² According to Sheikh Budella family members.

²³ It seems that even Wolf Leslau, the linguist and orientalist author of some grammars of Gurage language, has met Sheikh Budella during his field research at the beginning of the 60's.

opposed the activities of Sheikh Budella, thus, showing to fear him for the great fascination he had on crowds; and the Derg of Mengistu Haile Mariam followed a similar policy. In fact, Sheikh Budella disappeared at that time, leaving the position to his elder son, Said Mikbas, who was exiled and kept under control in Wollaita, very far from Abreit. The question of legitimate descent has not been solved through this passage and is still open today. Two of the sons have entered into conflict (they have been detained for a long period). For the time being, one of the elders in the area is assigned by the *t'ib* to act as chairman.

Sheikh Budella owned many plots of land among the Ennamor:

«... He had more than 280 hectares, mostly ensete, which he had bought from the government and left at the disposition of the poor. He distributed the sacrificed animals to the poor, among the 100.000 oxen he possessed. Even today a ceremony of *duha* is held each Tuesday to thank him for his extraordinary generosity. No one more than him has done so much for us Gurage: he built bridges, schools, roads; he developed the educational system, the planting, the electricity network, horticulture, but most of all medicine, magic medicine and psychological medicine, not only medicine like in the hospital. Today there are 600 *muzafir* in Abreit who study the Quran and his prayer books, supported during their studies by the Committee of Abreit Masgid, founded in his honour and thanks to the wealth he left!».²⁴

Most of his sons, «more than 50 persons», live in Canada today:

«Dr. Mohammed is a medical doctor, Aminu teaches accounting and Fatih is a researcher in the University. And there are all the others...».²⁵

Today in Abreit, tributes are given to the many descendants who have not yet emigrated and continue to administrate the wealth accumulated in the past, i.e. the management of the sanctuary as it is today, with all the connected new institutions: schools, shelter for the sick and so on.

The sacred place

The celebration of Abreit *maulid* is much followed and thousand of pilgrims come to attend it. Already some kilometres before the sanctuary, the road is full of pilgrims. Thousands of men, women and children walk for days or travel for weeks in order to participate in this extraordinary religious feast held in honour of the holy Sheikh Budella. As one gets closer to the main religious centre of the region, the roads are bordered by small shops offering poor merchandise and mostly food, as well as

²⁴ According to Sheikh Budella family members.

²⁵ According to Sheikh Budella family members.

shelters built over one day and one night: «There, the pilgrims can rest for 5 birr only!».²⁶

Around the holy enclosure, everything is transformed in a series of compounds, in which other compounds develop. On the right, a series of buildings used for the permanent fundraising to support the sanctuary. On the left, the compound of the sanctuary, in which there are «600 mosques». They have been built in wood and corrugated iron, *korkorò*, or in wood and mud. Most of them are plain buildings wide about 7 meters and long 9 meters, the height is around 5 meters. Other mosques are twice or even three time as big. Only one has a circular plan. Women are not allowed in the enclosure. In this huge compound, there is another compound in which the main mosque and the religious school, the *madrassa*, have been built. The entire religious complex is still managed by the descendants of Sheikh Budella.



Photo 1: Entering the Abreit Maulid sanctuary with *chat*. [Photo by A. L. Palmisano]

There are no less than 50.000 pilgrims who stay there during the whole month of Ramadan or for the days of *maulid* celebration. The believers camp day and night in the sacred compound, scattered in small groups, each one has its own space defined by blankets and curtains, hung between poles, or by branches stuck in the ground. Each group has a mosque of reference, according to the *t'ib* to which it

²⁶ According to Gurage merchants interviewed on the road to the sanctuary.

belongs. Each group is a prayer group, composed of men who have travelled together and belong either to the same family or to the same religious brotherhood. Each group constitutes therefore a *jama'a*, i.e. an assembly of believers, absorbed in prayer. Prayer itself and meditation are stimulated by the consumption of *chat*, a slightly hallucinogenic alkaloid plant, chewed on these occasion in huge quantities, day and night. The pilgrims sleep on mats formed by the *chat* leaves, which have been discarded for not being sufficiently tender. The attitude of the crowd is friendly and filled with curiosity towards the presence of the foreigner. Many young men and children follow the group of visitors composed of Gurage and *faranji* (“foreigners”); they are willing to be photographed.



Photo 2: Groups constituting *jama'a*, the assembly of believers, absorbed in prayer. [Photo by A. L. Palmisano]

The minaret rises in the middle of the compound, curiously isolated from the body of the main mosque. It is the only stone construction and it is about 15 meters high. A kind of *chat* market is organised around it. It is the only place inside the compound in which this plant is sold and bought. During the pilgrimage one gets involved in a lengthy *da'wa* ceremony with the crowd. *Da'wa* is a Muslim ceremony of prayer, *salat*, in which *dhikr*, the litanies in honour of a teacher, i.e. of a saint honoured with fervour, in this case Sheikh Budella, are uninterruptedly recited, with the *awrad*, the *manzuma*, the psalmodic reading of the Quran and other religious texts of the tradition; *da'wa*, according to the Gurage, is the prayer performance which

leads to the ecstatic contemplation, in the expectation of the vision of the saint. And among the Gurage, contemplation is favoured by the consumption of really great quantities of *chat*.

Thousands of women meet outside the sacred compound. They too chew *chat*, sing in prayer groups and beat the ritual drum. No men belong to these groups outside the compound, although many of them stop to observe and enjoy these feminine cult groups. They are actually the same groups which, on other occasions, practice the trance cult of the *mwyet*, in honour of the Mother Goddess Damwamwit.

Once again, the great religious tradition of the Gurage is shown. A tradition in which the women today, as in the past, venerate the Mother Goddess Damwamwit and men are involved in the cult of Waq, the uranic Divinity, while they all of them fear the unforeseeable, uncontrollable and powerful Bozha, God of Thunder.

The Abreit sanctuary has in fact been built next to the central cult places dedicated to Bozha – the Mazuhur *t'ib*, among Chaha – and to Waq – Waq-zägär, among Ennamor.

IV. Considerations: no politics without place

Places and stages

Human condition is migration, i.e. the movement on the world's surface. Not the stay but the movement: this is what being-there, being-in-the-world is. In this eternal condition of exodus, as resettled, fugitive, refugee, immigrant, man moves and together with him his own language, religion, culture, relatives alive or dead, the ashes of the ancestors, or the incorporated ancestors in a necklace of beads, the *mwyet*.

All this, an immaterial luggage but extremely present, forms the stage of his social action. This is the effective stage with which and on which he moves, and it can also be modified, transformed with the passing of time.

Man moves and his stage together with him. When he meets other social actors, he meets other stages. And all these stages look for a place, a space in order to realize oneself fully as stage and allow thus the social actor to realize himself as such on what he now wants to define as his stage. But the other social actor is also in search of a space, a place for his own stage. Two, three or more stage risk, and this is unavoidable, superposition on a same space and may fear to cancel each other. Each stage, and together with it its single or many actors, tries to outshine the other and to monopolize space.

Could a co-presence of more than one stage on a same space, with more than one actor acting other parts which are simply different and not integrated, be possible? Sacred spaces such as Abreit actually answer this question: social actors who belong to various ethnic groups or to a same ethnic group but to different clans, to various residential, linguistic, cultural, social, generation groups and so on but also to different religious groups, perform roles which belong to different stages on the same space, in what becomes a single place.

Abreit is a sacred place at the carrefour of liturgies, theologies and politics. And in the Horn of Africa there are hundreds of places like this.

There are the «600 mosques» of Abreit Maulid. Stages which co-exist on a same space that is clearly defined through impassable limits, on a carpet of *chat*, and at the same time, beyond it: the grass carpet or the *chat* carpet, the space which cannot be treaded upon by shoes, or by women or children, marks the foundation of an extra-stage. This extra-stage is ontologically different from the simple addition of all the co-existing stages: it is the sacred space.

This place of ritual is an arena for liturgical and spiritual competition; as a place of contamination among pilgrims, as a sacred place, it is also a place of contamination and confrontation of liturgies and then of theologies: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Third Faith – polytheism. The pilgrim faces the visible expression, although highly symbolised and structured of his own being, and then the reflected legitimation and representation of his existence.

At the same time, the Abreit ritual performance contributes to the regeneration of social relationships, that is to the foundation of an updated fluid structure of social relationships. The ritual achieves the territorialisation of space, namely the foundation of a controlled political arena, through prescribed acts of “rebellion” – i.e. a complex of social relationships which transcends everyday life – and direct representations of harmony and solidarity, and through the ritual and repetitive performance of the participated well-being and the staying well together. A suspension, if not a solution, of conflict situation is obtained as well as an increase of social density, at least in the compound and/or in the area. And this may serve as a paradigm for many participants.

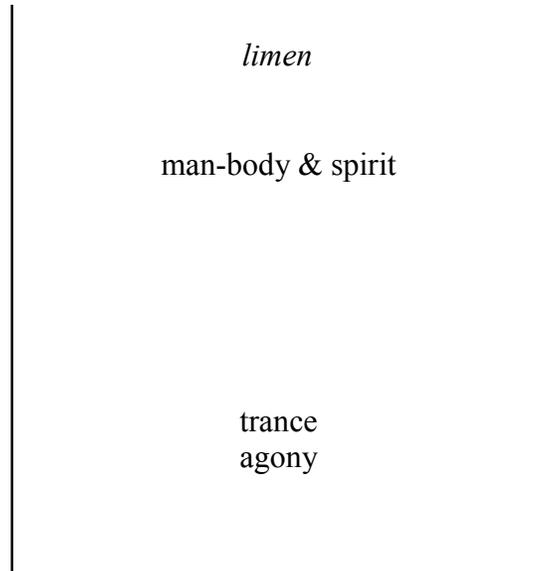
Places and stages of Divinity: some reflections on us and Divinity

Religious performances in Gurage society can lead us to challenging considerations concerning the idea of place and sacred place:

«Celebration of Waq during *Chisht* ceremony, is not like one in church using a plaque to symbolize, but the spirit rests on someone, male or female, and speaks through that person».²⁷

This is an extraordinary definition: we do not have the simulacrum of the Divinity in front of us, but we have the person in which Divinity has incarnated itself.

The body of the person in trance is a real place for Divinity, most probably the best place to be on earth. The body, the earthly place, becomes the place of residence of the spirit, the worthy house of the spirit. During the trance, the person, with his body as place/home of the Divinity, finds itself just between the two thresholds.²⁸



But in an other theological context, the Church said that with the death of Christ – who has definitely incarnated Divinity, since He is the son of the Divinity and as such the only and legitimate authorized – the possibilities to adore Divinity in whom He is hosted vanish together with Him. And a new story has begun: History in the perspective of Western idealism. Only Divinity remains in all Its unreachable and upsetting transcendence, while the mystery of the sublime and disconcerting intrinsic

²⁷ Gebreyesus Hailemariam, 1991.

²⁸ During the trance, the person with his body as place/home of Divinity, finds itself, just “between the two thresholds”, cf. Shihaboddin Yahya Sohravardi (1154-1191) in *The crimson Archangel*. This concept has been also expressed by Muhyi ad Din Abu Bakr Muhammed ibn Ali ibn Arabi (1165-1240), in his *The Meccan revelations*, with the Persian term *barzakh*. The term literally means «interval of time between death and resurrection, interstice, isthmus» or it indicates «a perilous situation, a connecting link, a picture of imagination, a whim, a fancy» and even «one in love with a woman».

divinity of man is contemporaneously denied. (Does this image of man not only as a sinner from his origin, but above all hideous and infamous through destiny, not derive from that?). Only the simulacre of Divinity remains then the absolute deceit, except for the Gurage and for those who do not bother to think religions in terms of logical rigorism, within their own postulates. The Gurage seem to be beyond revelation...

In the *medium*, in a state of trance, man becomes the place of the manifestation of transcendency, i.e. the contingent opportunity of Its manifestation. Impossibility for the Divinity to manifest Itself elsewhere, if not in that place which is the body of man. (In fact the Eucharist, the Holy Host, is swallowed). The body of man becomes then the temple of the Divinity; but we are those to decide to host the Divine in ourselves. In this case, we do not have the anxious expectation, the mystery of the God who calls and makes Saint Paulus fall from his horse (what kind of horse! *ye zar faras?*), striking with the terror and the splendour of Its manifestation. The *numinosum* is thus missing: It is a tamed Divinity.

***Timor*: fear for the extra-natural powers**

Petronius says, *primus in orbe deos fecit timor*.²⁹ If things stand like this, then how many fears have the Gurage if we look at their rich pantheon and their so much practised syncretism, complementary to the major monotheistic religions? The contemporaneity of the cults (the co-presence of two, three and even more major liturgies), in the praxis of the social actor, can be once more evidenced as a bonus of communication capacity, of religious communication capacity. This capacity informs, in its turn, on a continuous social and political action able to transform the world and to interpret it continuously. This theological and liturgical pluralism is a witness of this capacity of answering the many and contradictory stimuli of modern society, of market economy, of the political, administrative and territorial transformation which takes place in the world. This religious plurality in a single family, in a single person, unveils religion as an answer, or rather as a structure of answers. The *timor* is thus *timor* of the manifestation of the Divinity, for its representations: it is not *timor* of Divinity. We make then a distinction between Bozha, the Divinity and its destructive manifestation, the lightening which reduces the house or even the entire *abarus* in a mound of ashes.

The manifestations of Divinity are the reflections of the aptitude to have social relationships in the new context: they fix the ideal-type of social structure, in an extraneous bodily shape. But these Divinities are also the manifestation of Divinity as *Verkörperung*, embodiment, of paradigmatic social structures, the expression of a social and political locality, i.e. of a comprehension and ethnic foundation of the world, of the territory: the world as an assemblage of territories.

²⁹ Petronius, fr. 27.

Religious movements manifest themselves as movements of space colonization, of actual appropriation of space through a series of activities meant to give signification: through territorialization processes.

It involves processes of limits, borders constitution – *regere fines* –, also through the tabuization of the world, that is through the moral definition, the ethic definition of the world and of man's work.

Religion faces the themes of the being-there and of the non-being-there in the world. These themes concern the presence in the terrestrial space, the chthonic presence which is manifested through the Other. This is, therefore, the research for a language which can and must be spoken together with the Other for the successful construction of the being-there, the being-in-the-world.

The absolute presence is first of all – besides being a chthonic and unique presence, and besides “being in the space” – the presence offered by “being in the body”, therefore by «being in the space of “being in the body”».

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