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Possession as Cure.
The Ayaana Cult of Waso Borana

Introduction

This article will present some ethnographic data concerning a Muslim spirit possession cult, the Husseiniya order, which is widespread in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. It will mainly deal with the form that this cult has taken at its furthest southern border, in the Isiolo District of Kenya, and particularly among the Waso Borana. The essential role this cult plays in everyday life is as a social framework for the diagnosis and treatment of particular forms of ill health, thought to be caused by spirit possession.

A common phenomenon in popular versions of Islam, at least in Africa, is the idea that symptoms of disease or other signs of discomfort can be caused by spirit possession. It is necessary here to point out immediately that “spirit possession” comprises a wider phenomenon than the exstatic trance that the term in Western everyday language refers to. Trance is possession in its most intensive form, the one which makes communication possible between the spirit and for example a ritual specialist, and enables them to negotiate the conditions for a peace settlement between the spirit and the one possessed, which will liberate the latter from symptoms. Differing forms of discomfort can however be culturally interpreted as spirit possession long before such a dramatic peak is reached.

A background of deprivation

The Waso Borana are a contingent of pastoral Oromo who fled into the British East African Protectorate in the context of Abyssinian expansion. They have been living in the Isiolo District of Kenya since about 1920. They used to be wealthy pastoralists rearing camels and cattle, sheep and goats, but today their economic position is precarious due to war and drought. Soon after Kenya became independent in 1964, a secessionist war broke out in the area, a war which in many respects was an antecedent to the more recent Ogaden war in southern Ethiopia. Having been Moslems for twenty years the
Waso Borana supported to a great extent the Somali-dominated guerilla which wanted to separate the northern arid region from the rest of new Kenya. The unrest continued for about five years, and ended for the Borana in disastrous losses of cattle. These losses made them very vulnerable to the droughts that were to follow in the wake of the war, and in practice deprived them of control over vast grazing lands (Dahl 1979).

To Boran households and individuals the losses implied that many were expelled from the old way of gaining a livelihood. People who could find a market for their labour moved to Nairobi or Mombasa. Others started to cultivate maize on a modest scale and under very unfavourable conditions, having insufficient experiences as farmers. Many, particularly widows and divorcees who had earlier been protected by traditional forms of mutual help, were left totally without access to a subsistence. They gathered in Isiolo town and at other local centres hoping to get emergency assistance, to find temporary male protectors or to raise some little money from the selling of firewood or frankincense.

The Boran culture is by tradition centered on the care of pastoral herds. The roles of men and women are coloured by this, so that a virile man is conceptually the same as a man who has a large and healthy herd in constant expansion, and a successful woman is the one who gives birth to many children and manages the milk resources of the family well, so that the children prosper and so that the guests of the family are satisfied and happy.

It is difficult to explain in a few words exactly what it means to such a society to lose large parts of the basis for production. Immediate effects on the access to nutrients and on the general condition of health are what have primarily attracted attention from health authorities in Kenya. In a longer time perspective, however, such a loss also has broad psychological consequences that follow from the difficulties people experience in matching the expectations of their social roles and the ideals of a successful life. Husbands can no longer fulfil the role of providers that was the cultural essence of their part of the marital contract. Women can no longer be successful milkmanagers and mothers. Divorcees have also, in contrast to the situation in the traditional Borana society, become very common. How poverty is evaluated is always a question of culture, but it is worth noting that the poverty that exists today in Isiolo is not only a question of scarcity of food but that it is also constantly evaluated in terms of personal value and life quality.

It is against this background that the Hussainiya cult operates. The cult is conceived of by its members as a Moslem tariga, centered on Sheikh Hussain of Bale, a person who according to the traditions lived in the 13th century (Andrzejewski 1972; Braukämpfer 1980). For all members, however, being an adherent of the latter saint is synonymous with being possessed by ayuna spirits and taking part in the treatment sessions at which the spirits are identified and treaties made with them.

The cult corresponds closely to Lewis's concept of a deprivation cult (1966),
rather than taking the form found among such northerly Oromo as the Ada and the Macha (see Knutsson 1967 and Morton 1973), where the spirits act as "mystical advocates" for the moral order, backing up authority in the context of legal cases. In Isiolo town it draws its membership from destitute ex-pastoralists, men and women of Borana, Garri and Somali extraction and to some extent from the widows and wives of wealthy Somali merchants. Sheikh Mohamed, one of the most prominent ritual leaders in Isiolo in 1973, estimated that there were about 400 adepts in Isiolo, a town of about 6000 inhabitants. In the pastoral hinterland of Isiolo it was less easy to point at the cult's base of recruitment as distinguished from the general pastoral community, but the "power holders"—camp leaders and community elders—were notably absent from the cult and frequently negative to it.

The concept of *ayaana*

The word *ayaana* in traditional common use by the pastoral Borana on both sides of the border does not specifically refer to spirits. In everyday language it was used as an expression related to the traditional lunar calendar, which has 27 named days. The different days have connotations of positive and negative influences acting on different activities, things and social categories, and the calendar serves as a guideline for ritual activities. Among agricultural Oromo in Ethiopia the use of *ayaana* as a spiritual concept is more common. The two users are however not totally irrelevant to each other, as can be understood perhaps if we think in terms of parallelisms with saints' days. The traditional cosmology of the Oromo represents the world in terms of a "platonic" division between on the one hand "essences" or "principles" (*ayaana*) that have an independent existence apart from their temporal and material realization, and 'reality'. God is the sum of all principles, but also something more (Gemachu Megersa, oral information; see also Bartels 1983). This general structure seems to be reflected in Morton's description of Ada Oromo beliefs about *ayaana* who are

... a numberless category of invisible, intangible spirit beings who inhabit the atmosphere. They live in a spirit society which resembles that of the earthly Galla (/Oromo/). They are creations of Waqa or Divinity. The Ayana were given by Waqa to the Galla as a special sign of his favour and to help them observe Galla law and custom which are also his gifts. They are believed to be ranked hierarchically. Analytically, this ranking may be seen in terms of their relative closeness to Divinity and thus their relative power. Furthermore, each named ayana spirit may have an infinite number of refractions (1973:74).

Within the framework of the Husseiniya cult the concept of *ayaana* has a more limited reference. It refers to a particular category of spirits, who together with the djinns were created from smoke on the same day as the human beings were created from mud. The spirits were then given to the Prophet as
a help in the battle against Christianity and later transferred to Sheikh Husain of Bale. As a token of gratitude for their services in the struggle against Christianity the spirits wished free access to the humans, but God limited their power to choosing particular people as objects of their demands. The spirits have the power to affect somebody with a wish for particular gifts. If the gifts are refused, they seek permission from God to kill the person in question. On the other hand, if the gift is handed over as requested, they promise to leave the victim alone without symptoms of disease.

_Ayaana_ does not seem to have been known in Isiolo District in the precise sense it has now until 1952 when the first possession cases in Isiolo were reported among people coming from Marsabit and Moyale. A specialist in dates (*ayantu*) from the Ethiopian Borana told me that _ayaana_ possession among the Borana in his home area was known only from his adult time: it arrived in the period when the generation class of Bulle Dabasa were in reign (1929—36) from "Konso and Jamjamtu".

_Ayaana_ spirits make themselves known through a number of diffuse symptoms such as headaches, chest complaints or aching joints. Presumably, these are frequently complaints with a psychosomatic background. Two typical patients were Dokatu and Halake. Dokatu was tended by her co-wife after a long period of headaches. She had two still-births and was constantly nagged at by her disappointed husband for not being able to cook properly, for making eyes at young men etc. Halake was brought to an _ayaana_ specialist after a violent attack that first led him into a trance and then made him faint. He had just left a party celebrated by secondary school boys, at which he had been a guest but not a member on equal footing. This boy had been forced to leave school after Standard Four, due to poverty. Normally it is only after repeated failures to help by modern medical services such as are available in the area that the kinsmen of the afflicted take the initiative to get the diagnosis of _ayaana_ possession by a specialist. The specialist herself or himself is not supposed to take the initiative unless of course the afflicted person is in the specialist's own family.

The affliction is thought of as contagious, particularly in its initial stage when the spirit is still "unidentified". A person suffering from an _ayaana_ may unintentionally transmit it to another person if he or she is annoyed or envious. What is dangerous in this context are the uncommunicated aggressions. Apart from this, _ayaana_ possession is not interpreted as a sign that matters are not well with social relations. In fact, the _ayaana_ may voluntarily settle on somebody whom it loves for example for his/her interest in _ayaana_ matters, as a punishment on somebody who tries in the wrong way to interfere with the activities of the spirit or the cult members, or again, out of envy. People who take a positive or negative interest in the cult are thus more likely than others to develop signs of affliction. But this is nothing that people are thought to seek actively. Even a rather successful female shaman stated that she regarded her affliction as a kind of inevitable fate or life burden that she could neither enjoy nor complain over, but had to carry since it had been given to meeting they regard

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given to her. Nevertheless, elders do not like their youth to take part in ayana meetings, not because they do not believe in these spirits but rather because they regard them as pertaining to the world of evil, and perhaps because the seances involve mixed male/female dancing.

The ayana specialists

Specialists are recruited in two alternate ways. The first is through formal training as apprentices of other, senior leaders (abba sera) preferably at the shrine of Sheikh Hussain in Ethiopia. There is an ideal, formalized hierarchy of authority, whereby the apprentice never reaches the same level as his teacher. This is a formal structure where ritual authority is handed over in a strictly regulated way which reminds of the handing-over ceremonies for the Abba Gada in the traditional Oromo system (Legesse 1973), or of the relation between Sufic disciple and teacher. During the formalized training the specialist is introduced into the assumedly commonly shared moral codex for ayana specialists, particularly relating to the dangers of religious fraud. The codex also refers to the proper handling of such emblems as “the rod of Moses”, the shaman’s stick, which would be desecrated if it was taken to places or situations marked by pollution or lack of peace. That is to say, it should not be taken to places where prostitutes dwell, nor carried on cattle raids.

The second method of recruitment concerns people who are simply drawn into the role of shaman by having had many possession experiences themselves, in combination with personal charismatic traits. Several such charismatic leaders in the cult’s periphery are presumably ill aware of the alternative, more formalized structure of recruitment and authority.

One case of the latter type of career was Chukulisa, who told me the story of the origin of her calling: When Chukulisa was very young, living in Ethiopia, she used to look after cattle together with the other girls. According to herself, the children once ran away from the cattle and played ayana for fun. Suddenly an eagle (risa) hanging in the air above motionlessly, screamed and made itself ready to fall rapidly on to its prey. All of the children were very scared and ran away, as that particular bird was a well-known object of fear because of its link to a particular ayana spirit, Laboba. Seven of the small girls were later afflicted by the ayana, however only after marriage when “they had houses and food to help the spirits with”. In contrast, Chukulisa herself was hit while she was still young. One day as she moved about in the camp, an old female shaman transferred the affliction to her.

Little Chukulisa ran mad and, as she told me, “without using my legs I fled across the thorn fence into the cattle corral”. She then deserted her family, to move into the house of the old lady, becoming her companion and apprentice. “Even now, thirty years later, I do not like my own family”.
The ayaana sessions

Treatment of ayaana affliction takes place during a number of sessions (sera) whose contents can be specified as:

a) identification
b) "apology"
c) fulfilment of promise.

The spirit is first identified through its preferences for certain rhythms and songs, and then negotiated with. The main patient and the specialist are at this stage both in trance, and normally a number of other attending people fall in trance too. Given certain gifts of appeasement, which follow a stereotyped system and involve such items as rings, cloth, popcorn, honey cookies, perfume etc., the spirit finally agrees not to bother its victim more except in the context of regular treatment sessions. There is great elaboration in the rules of how to handle different spirits. Knowledge of such rules is a means for the specialist to prove his or her legitimacy.

To prepare for the first session, coffee fruits (buna) are boiled in ghee and maize corns roasted to be kept in store until later in the night. The dish of roasted coffee fruit is an Oromo sacrament of peace and fertility, which is frequently communally consumed in the context of prayers. The whole fruit, with shell, is cut with a knife, and swells in the hot fat. The form of the coffee bean, reminiscent of the cowrie bead (eletan) and the female fertility that the latter stands for (Bartels 1983), the elements of growth and heat, and the use of butter, that symbol for richness and "fruitful, easy sexuality" (Baxter 1982), are all relevant to an exegesis of this sacrament. After having been fried in hot butterfat, the beans are put in a glass of milk which is sent around so that each participant can take a sip.

The ayaana specialists also lit frankincense (lubadin) in a special clay vessel, or if the ritual is held in a traditional Boran mat house, in a special hole in the ground. The use of various incenses, similar to the coffee ceremony, is not limited to this context, but a prominent trait in all Cushitic liturgy. Nice smells attract blessings and good spirits.

The ceremony then begins with Quranic prayer and hadras, religious hymns, particularly directed to Sheikh Hussain. These end with the most common Quranic prayer, "Alhamduillahi Rabil alamin . . ." The house is kept in darkness, except for the glow of the frankincense the scent of which fills the air, and as people arrive and join in, the hut may become very crowded. The songs are accompanied by handclapping and the leader beats a drum.

After the final prayer, all the people attending go outside. They gather in a ring, shoulder to shoulder, around the patient. The leader invites her most prominent spirit by a special song, and as the latter descends on her, it formally takes over the leadership of the session. It may begin its intervention by demanding a fridi or fee of 5—20 Ksh from the patient. It is not necessarily the leading spirit who arrives first, nor that of the victim, but anybody in the crowd who has been possessed earlier can fall into trance first. Surreptitiously
such spirits take over the leading role in singing from the specialist leader. The group test different songs in order to make the spirit of the patient make itself known. In theory, the spirit may have disturbed the patient for a long time without having so to speak come out in public. Different “families” or spirits have different tunes, and respond by typical speech and movement patterns. Drum rhythms and the generous use of frankincense at these sessions are universal phenomena in possession cults and they contribute to promoting hyperventilation and later trance. A preliminary identification is then refined by further singing. The ayaana of the leader can also communicate directly with the ayaana of the patient so as to identify it. The leader “is” the ayaana descending on him/her and is thus entitled to ask any question of the ones possessing other attendants, including why they have afflicted their victims. Representing a spirit of higher dignity, the leader receives praises and shows of respect from the lesser spirits. The communication is carried out in a special argot, which is said to be a mixture of Boran ritual language and “Sidam”. The spirits may show their like or dislike for the singing, which ideally should be a massive communal song. Sometimes the spirit feels that the song is not properly carried out, or if it is new to the area, it is thought that it may like music which is still not commonly known except by the leader. When the spirit dislikes the music, this will show in signs of nausea, fainting and general discomfort among the participants, including the main patient. As the evening proceeds after a successful identification, more and more people go into trance. Later, around 23.00, in the night, the coffee and maize is served in response to the demands from the possessing spirits.

When somebody is possessed, his or her head is covered with a white cloth. After identification of the spirit, the main patient is also covered with a cloth and made to inhale lubadin smoke.

Bun is served in two rounds. The first is considered as a sign of apologetic submissiveness to the spirit. The second sanctifies an agreement on a specific day on which to deliver the things demanded by that particular spirit, maybe two weeks ahead. Each of these servings should contain seven beans. If the victim has been possessed for a long time, five more coffee beans may be served in order to satisfy the appetite of the ayaana.

The second session also begins by the leader inviting his/her leading spirit by lighting lubadin, singing hymns and the special song of that spirit. The leader will order all other people who are present and who “have ayaanas” to be likewise possessed and tell them to identify themselves. He or she will ask them who the spirit is that is possessing the sick person, and this time, since the identity is already established, the group will shout the family name of that ayaana and then its individual name. A sacrificial animal and other gifts have been prepared in advance on the basis of the knowledge of the spirit’s family preferences. The leader will then again provide the patient with frankincense. The patient is sitting on the floor and the leader calls the “family” of the spirit to come forth and represent itself. The representative may be the “king spirit” of that family, and/or the spirit actually possessing
the patient, or possibly some other spiritual kin of the afflicting ayaana. Normally there should be at least two ayaanas of importance in the sera: the king and the possessing spirit, or the possessing spirit and a female partner of that spirit.

Sometimes all three of these categories are present simultaneously. The leader puts some grass—again a symbol of peace and fertility—in front of the patient, and asks the possessing spirit whether it has accepted it. The spirit then confirms in the name of God, the prophet Mohamed and Sheikh Hussain. Then the leader asks the spirit whether the sacrificial animal is fit and acceptable, after which the animal will be slaughtered. The ayaana is then invited to drink the blood of the sacrificial animal, and presented with coffee and asked in the same way whether these items are acceptable. The session ends with a song of praise after which most attendants retire to sleep—i.e. on the spot, if they do not live very close by. In the morning, new hymns are sung. The ayaana of the patient is called to possess him, and asked whether it has accepted those things given to it the day before. It is then offered the roasted right foreleg of the animal if he is a Muslim, and the left leg if he is not a Muslim. The notion of eating forelegs or not relates to the traditional division of moieties among the Borana (cf. Bartels 1983:156). The right foreleg, associated with power, is forbidden to the senior moiety of the Borana “as power does not eat power”. Why in the Sheikh Hussain cult, seniority should be retained for non-Muslim ayaanas is a puzzle which cannot be solved here. Anyhow, the spirit takes seven bites from the foreleg presented to it and is then offered a mixture of various fried parts from the animal: one part from the liver, one from the stomach, one from the kidney and so on. It is made to promise that it will not in the future “consume” the patient. The remaining parts of the animal are shared out among the participants and can be prepared and consumed at will. Those who have attended and who have been possessed and other people will be offered food. It is considered that those non-possessed should show some restraint, since “the ayaana are very hungry”. The ayaana of the patient will now be offered 7 maize cakes (mufa), 7 coffee-fruits, 7 pop-corn—also a growing item!—and 3 cups from a kettle full of coffee boiled without sugar. It is also offered first a red rosario “to cool the tempers”, then a black one (tusbo) for religious purposes, a chain of the same length as the rosarios, (i.e. ending on the hip), a white cloth called mili-mili and a ring. The spirit will be asked whether it accepts all this. If it confirms, other participants can take their share of the food, and then the session is ended.

Five days later, more or less the same ceremony should be held again in order to appease the spirit to leave the victim alone. The things offered follow a standard schedule, but vary a little with the identity of the spirits present. The king is entitled to a sheep if he is present. If the possessing spirit is a male but is accompanied by a female ayaana, which sometimes occurs, she has also a right to have her demands fulfilled. An accompanying male ayaana has a right only to be invited to share the remainder after the session is concluded.
Spirit families and interethnicity

As has been mentioned above, the spirits are classified into different families, about which there is a great degree of detailed "knowledge" acting for the individual specialist as proof of his legitimacy. The five main families are the Somali-speaking "Danakiri", the Amharic-speaking Amarenza, the Arsi-speaking Fanô (or Digre Ababa), the Arabiya, and the Warra Kola. These families vary in demands, attributes and language. Furthermore, they are either Christians, Muslims or "pagan". A similarly syncretistic character of the spirit world is described for the Ada Oromo ayaana cult by Morton (1973:77) and by Brögger (1986:71f.) for the possession cults of the Sidamo.

The world of spirits is multi-ethnic. Isolo is also in human terms a place where several ethnic groups meet. There are Bantu-speaking Meru, Nilotic Turkana and Samburu, Cushitic Borana and Somali and a mixture of Arabic, Indian and Kikuyu merchants. It is however obvious that the importance of Amharas and Danakils (Afar) to the daily life of the Isiloans is negligible, as these are ethnic groups mainly found in northern and eastern Ethiopia. Many of the younger Borana and Somali have never come across representatives for such categories. Nevertheless the clusters of connotations associated with these spirits have a relevance for them. Obviously there were parallels between the Christian, militaristic Amharic regime that existed in Ethiopia at the time of my fieldwork, and the Kenyan government of that time which was (and is) dominated by Christians. The latter had presented itself in rather harsh terms to the population of Isolo during the so-called shifia war. The Danakil spirits were conceived of as ayanic herd-owners and in fact they had a close correspondence in real life in the pastoral Somali. The Warra Kola represented the traditional, unconverted Borana sphere.

In fact, the cult transgressed cultural boundaries on three different levels:
a) by the participation of members from several linguistic and/or cultural groups—Borana, Sakuye, Gabbra, various Somali categories,
b) by providing a description of the ayaana pantheon in terms which reflected and perhaps also represented actual social forces in a multi-ethnic setting,
c) by drawing its symbols from the traditional Oromo and Sidamo religions, orthodox and popular Islam and Coptic Christianity.

Perhaps one can say that the position of the cult at the crossroads of cultures has implications both for its membership recruitment and for the position of the ayaana specialist or shaman as a kind of cultural entrepreneur. The cultural diversity of Isolo town is perhaps particularly notable in the field of spirit beliefs, interpretation of mental disorder and explanations of trance. In fact, the different cultural groups have different ideas of spirit categories which partly parallel each other, partly are of a contrasting nature (zar, m mogul, ruhan, wadado, sheitanis, pepo etc.). The classification of these as causing agents of madness or possession varies, as does their association with human relations or natural phenomena.

To start with, it should be noted that ayaana possession is not the only form
of possession or trance taking place in Isiolo. Among the more traditionally oriented Borana, as well as among their southern Nilotic neighbours in Isiolo, the Samburu, trance behaviour very closely similar to the possession behaviour in ayaana is seen as a result of very strong feelings, for example in the context of war songs and cattle praising songs (Spencer 1965; Legesse 1973:103). There is also a related phenomenon called zaar which does not correspond to the zar cult as described by Lewis (1971:171f.). Zar is, according to beliefs generally held in Isiolo, not a matter of spirit possession but more akin to "emotional trance" instigated by dancing and singing. Men and women partake in such sessions, with a slight overweight for young men.

Nor is ayaana the only type of spirit to be found in popular belief. The Swahili concept of pepo, "winds", for example is locally interpreted as referring to agents causing paralyssation of important bodily functions. Ayaana are distinguished from jinn, who similarly to them possess people but whose resulting symptoms tend to take the form of antisocial mental disorder. Jinn relate less than ayaana to disturbances in human relations: frequently they are thought of as connected to certain specific places like latrines, dry canyons etc. Their categories correspond less clearly to those of the human world. So, for example, they are not divided into Muslims and Christians, although they are said to speak human Arabic, Somali and Aruso. A clear distinction between jinn and ayaana is however not always easy to get. The jinn are like the ayaana classified into five families, of which one is mngis, a category which appears to be closely parallel to ayaana. On the whole, the symptoms of jinn possession seem to be more violent and apart from those caused by the mngis, they cannot be cured through direct negotiation but rather through what one would want to call exorcism by Quranic reading. The mngis are in Isiolo regarded as having been brought to the town by Somalis. Like other jinn they are linked to exceptional natural phenomena, particularly trees. The spread of these beliefs over the Horn of Africa, and the relatively confusing relation that exists between the various categories can be illustrated by the fact that Lewis, writing about northern Somalia (1968:205), notes that "mngis are considered to be ethiopian spirits (zar habashi) and represent the most serious kind of zar affliction".

This multiplicity in itself could be a resource for a creative development of new symbolic forms and ideas. It is also noteworthy, however, that many of the symbols used in themselves are culturally ambiguous in the sense that they take on a different meaning depending upon which cultural tradition one approaches them from. The very word ayaana in this way contains ambiguity, as it is very similar to the Arabic word for sick, eyaan.

Another illustrative example of this doubleness is the stick of Moses (Asa Musa, Ar.; Ule Musa, Oromo) which was mentioned above. Sheikh Mohamed, an ayaana specialist claiming legitimization from the spiritual centre of the Sheikh Hussain cult in Ethiopia, claimed that these sticks should always be manufactured at Inajina in Ethiopia by special carpenters living at the grave of Sheikh Hussain. (I have not been in the position to check this on the spot, so to speak.)
Chukulisa, our example of a more charismatically based specialist, stated that she herself had obtained her stick in Ethiopia but that there was nothing that hindered that the stick was for example inherited from mother to daughter. The stick of Moses, in Muslim as in Jewish tradition, was the stick with which he effected the disasters of Egypt and divided the Red Sea. It was handed down to Sheikh Hussain from Moses via Prophet Mohamed according to the legend. This is the Muslim interpretation. What does then an Oromo exegesis say? It turns the stick and the paraphernalia associated with it into a gaadamoji, a person sacred because of having retreated from active life and from participation in the gaada-system, the old political and ritual system of the Oromo, based upon generation classes. The stick is cleft at one end like a shepherd’s stick, but with one end straight and one turning “in the wrong direction”. It should be equipped with all that a gaadamoji has. It has a right to have its own share of meat, “but does not eat it”. It has a right to have clothes, particularly a red headcloth, red being “the colour of God”. The stick should be anointed with fats as a sign of respect to Sheikh Hussain. Gum resin, another important ritual item linked to the gaada-system, should be put on it. The stick that I saw myself was also decorated with a rosary, a small leather pouch, presumably containing a Quranic verse, a wooden spoon and a string with cowrie beads (elelan).

Thus the sect joins people with different frames of reference in seemingly unitarian ritual, whose elements are however differentially interpreted by the different adherents. The specialist is left room to work out his own exegesis while trying to bring order into the system, but this also means that there is great competition between different ritual leaders as the teaching of one is likely to threaten the authority of the others. In our fieldwork, we came for example across two sheikhs who were disputing whether ayaana spirits die or not. One of them claimed that according to what he had been told by his teacher in Bale, the ayaanas do not die “because they drink life-giving water from the seventh, dark ocean”. His rival was convinced that ayaanas follow the universal rule that the only living being that has been provided with eternal life was the prophet Khalil.

Even angels die: they are constantly re-created from the smoke of the incense burner or from our breath when we pray or count on the rosario in the name of the Prophet. If ayaanas die, people however do not notice it as the son of the dead spirit will replace him.

To argue against this, the first old man referred to a case from his practice (something which was of course difficult to put in question without challenging the man’s authority completely). He had once spent three days beating and drumming in order to get contact with a particular spirit, but only been able to get in touch with one of the latter’s slave spirits. After a costly negotiation the slave promised that he was going to fetch his master from Bahar Tulukuma, the mystical dark sea.
Husseiniya and modern health care

As hinted at above, the ideas about ayanaic possession are only a small part of the complex of ideas of illness that the Isiolo people have. I mentioned the presence of other types of spirit beliefs: e.g. the jinn, who are considered more dangerous than the ayana because they lack a language. It is possible that the possession by these spirits also corresponds to psychotic states that are more difficult to cure. When it comes to physiological problems, it is obviously part of necessary technical knowledge to a pastoralist to have a certain degree of understanding of contagious diseases, of the connections between tick or insect attacks and illness, or of the linkage between bad hygiene and poor health.

When somebody is hit by common children’s diseases, malaria or influenza, it is not particularly likely that this will immediately be interpreted as an attack by spirits. The mode of explanation is more relevant when no apparent contagion—in a physical sense—appears to exist, or if some particular person appears to have a particular vulnerability to repeated infections, so that the “why just me?” question arises.

Phenomena like the ayana cult are sometimes classified as “ethno-psychiatry”. This is a disputable term, since it contains the idea that what we are concerned with is curing a sick soul. This is an idea that the one who is analyzing the phenomenon has, but which is hardly shared by the participants. For their part the soul is not necessarily involved more than by being suppressed. What one aims at getting to grips with are the physical symptoms caused by intervention of an external agent, not trouble situated in the psychical equipment of the patient.

To some extent the affiliation to the cult implies a direct rejection of modern medicine. At the time when I did my fieldwork, the local medical service in Isiolo town consisted of the dispensary run by the Catholic Mission and the governmental hospital. The latter had seven beds to cater for a population of 8000 people in the town itself. Further out in the district, where a population of about 50,000 people were living, there were a couple of small clinics and one or two dispensaries—the latter mainly sheds empty of everything except a desk, quinine and aspirin. The customers of such services, suffering from for example acute fever, had to expect very long queuing times and usually a somewhat uniform diagnosis of “malaria”. The efficiency of the cure that was offered was probably very low in relation to chronic experiences of pains in the joints or migraine, but also in relation to more serious ailments such as cancer. Nevertheless there were high expectations that Western medicine would be efficient.

What I want to say by this is that even if people as a rule appear to go to the modern hospital first, when they meet acute health problems, there is objectively vast scope for disappointment, and also a belief that after all, medical science has its limitations. Once the diagnosis “spirit possession” is made, modern medicine is no longer an alternative, and the one who looks for a solution to the problem usually that which is easy to accept and at the same time satisfying the cultural needs.
for such assistance takes the risk of annoying the spirits. There is a myth which points to the incompatibility of the two methods:

A European doctor was once stationed at Moyale on the border between Ethiopia and Kenya. The doctor was worried over the *ayaana* cult and interpreted it as a disease. Once he met a sick man whom he decided to cure. So he "measured" the man and found a bird with fire in its beak and tail! Then he gave an injection on the spot of the body where the bird had been found and whoops! it disappeared to some other place in the body. It became very difficult to localize it and inject. He wanted to operate it instead. Once and once again he injected but all the time the *ayaana* bird moved. Finally the *ayaana* told itself that instead of letting itself be disturbed by this man who nevertheless could not kill it, it would take its chance to attack him. The European went mad. Seven important specialists tried to cure him but soon tired. They called for a female shaman and the *ayaana* immediately came out. In mixed Swahili and English the *ayaana* and the specialist negotiated. The man said: if you cure me from this I will give you whatever you wish. The old woman asked for 60 shillings. The doctor then offered her 1000 shillings more and said: "Next to God nothing is so powerful as the *ayaana* spirits". The bird disappeared. He had it still but it did not disturb him. Never more did he tell people to stop with these things.

Towards an interpretation of the cult

Earlier observers of possession cults have frequently regarded the trance itself as a symptom of disease. To me this is doubtful, since trance is so obviously a cultural phenomenon, a state which you can learn how to transpose yourself into. The question is rather why some people choose this technique rather than another, what it is that makes them ask for help in the form of a trance attack, or accept being taken to diagnosis by a shaman.

Which are the psychological mechanisms behind this phenomenon? For me as a non-psychiatrist it is difficult to offer anything more than speculation. Quite a body of research from similar cults seems to show that it is not usually seriously psychotic people who are recruited into the cult: on the contrary, these are sorted out and the remaining ones could possibly be classed as mild neurotics. Some of this research is reviewed in I.M. Lewis’s *Ecstatic Religion* (1971). Lewis has mainly worked in Somalia with possession cults closely related to the *ayaana* cult. His approach is to look at the cults as the protest movements of oppressed categories, and particularly as part of the Somali gender struggle. By letting themselves be possessed, the weak gain strength and become able to ritually reinforce demands of attention as well as material resources such as perfume, rings etc.—things that the spirit claims, but which can then be worn by the patient on the behalf of its supernatural oppressor. There is certainly a seed of truth in Lewis’s interpretation, but to me it puts too much emphasis on directed aggression.

There is a well-established anthropological tradition in Africa to interpret witchcraft accusations in terms of aggression. In African culture it is common that illness or abnormal behaviour is seen as caused by some other person’s
inner evil. Accusation of witchcraft is thus a form of directed aggression which is far more common than real attempts of sorcery. Much anthropological thinking has been put into sorting out what structural relations are laden with conflicts of the type that will give stimulus to such accusations. With Borana such explanations of uncontrolled behaviour do also occur. I was witness to how a woman ran amok, shouting accusations of sorcery against a "lightskinned lady with a dark baby", a description which, as was obvious to all people present, well suited her co-wife. In other ethnographic contexts, possession in contrast to witchcraft has a central role in maintaining societal order and the intervention of the spirits is seen as a sign that something is seriously wrong in the social relations of the possessed one. As Lewis himself remarks, spirits in cults of the type discussed above tend to be amoral—they do not according to popular interpretation hit only the one who has bad relations to other people, but possibly rather somebody who has annoyed the spirit. This form of possession contains no accusation. I am more inclined to see it as an expression of a frustration related to the total social structure, a personal crisis of identity, which can best be understood by the Western reader if it is compared to the type of crisis involved when in our society one is involuntarily without a job or childless. Childlessness is something that hits in all layers of society, but for many families in the third world the expressions of poverty—landlessness, joblessness or herdlessness—have precisely this deeply personal character.

However, the psychological aspect of the cult, to which the drastic character of trance draws our attention, is only one of the important questions that one can raise about it. The ayaan cult offers meaningful structural links between people who otherwise have little basis for interaction, and who have been marginalized out from traditional social structure through a lack of kin contacts, children or property. The neighbourhoods where people with differing ethnic backgrounds are drawn together are in this way given a skeleton of relations that can offer structure to chaos.

The cult is, however, not only a social bridge but it also gives people an idiom for the adaptation of differing worlds of belief to each other. In this way it marries the original Oromo culture and the thoughts of Islam—and opens a forum for a creative unification of the old and the new. For many Borana "the new" involves not only Western influence but also the meeting with Muslim town culture. Analysing such bridges is a stimulating challenge.

Notes

1. The bulk of the material was collected in 1973-4 by the author jointly with Anders Hjort whom I hereby thank for his share of the empyr.

2. In a more prosaic context, incense charcoal is used for cleaning milk pots in order to make the milk stay fresh longer. Other incense is used to clean the private parts of women before and after intercourse. There is some kind of symbolic link between the hut, the milk-pot and the procreative part of the woman—as foci for the sheltering and nourishment of life.
References


