

# Syncretic Forms of Spiritual Healing Practices Among the Muslim Gurage of Southwestern Ethiopia

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## Abstract

At the time when Islam was propagated into the Sabat Bet Gurage, the second and third generations of the Abret shrine had been accommodated some elements of the traditional belief system and they adopted it into the frame of Sufi Islam. The main focus of this paper is to examine the processes how the indigenous healing practices were accommodated into the frame of Sufi Islam and the mechanisms applied for the persistency of the spiritual healing power of the leaders of Abret shrine. The religious leaders of the Abret shrine have been claiming that they have an extraordinary power to cure diseases which were previously believed to be healed only through performing traditional ritual rites. They claim that they had received *baraka* (blessing of the Prophet) that ensued from the common genealogical line descended to the Qurayyish tribe of the prophet Mohammed. And, it is believed the *baraka* that the Abret leaders possess has caused for the sacredness of the earth sample and spring water around the shrine that are used for healing purposes. Thus, this paper underscores the processes of the Islamization of indigenous healing practices and how ritually sanctified diseases were defined under the frame of Sufi Islam.

## Introduction: The ethno -history of the Sabat Bet Gurage people

The term Gurage is used as a common name for the three major politico-linguistic groups to whom they long inhabited the Gurage land. The Gurage ethnic groups are one of the Semitic language speaking peoples which inhabit the southwestern part of Ethiopia where great Cushitic ethnic diversity is prevailing. As it is argued by most scholars the language of the Gurage was originated from one of the Afro-Asiatic language families i.e. Semitic language. The Gurage ethnic groups are divided into three dialectically varied sub-groups: Northern, Eastern and Western Gurages. Northern Gurage is a region where for the most part is inhabited by Sodo (Kistane) Gurage and speaks *Sodign*. Eastern Gurage is populated predominantly by the Silte whose dialect resembles more Amharic language than the rest of two groups. And Western Gurage is the home of several sub-groups to whom are called jointly Sebat Bet Gurage (which is literary meant Seven Houses or Tribes of Gurage) —Ezha, Geta, Meq'werqwer, Muhre and Aklil, Endegane, Yegre-Anghet Cheha and Yinor (Gebreyesus 1991).

Following the downfall of the Dergu military regime and the coming to power of the EPRDF (Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front) in 1991, the Gurage people are organized as one of the thirteen zones which are constituted by the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). The Gurage zone is named after the Gurage people, whose homeland lies in this zone. The Gurage zone is bordered on the southeast by Hadiya and Yem special Woreda (district), on the west, north and east by the Oromiya Regional State and on the south by Silte Zone. This newly formed political administration includes the northern and Western Gurage. However, the Silte ethnic groups were voted for a referendum in 2000 unanimously to break away from the Gurage zone and formed their own administrative units, the Silte zone within SNNPR.

Based on the 2007 censuses, the Gurage zone has a total population of 1,279,646, of whom 622,078 are men and 657,568 women, with an area of 5,893.40 square kms. Gurage has a population density of 217.13 whereas 119,822 or 9.36% are urban inhabitants. The majority of the inhabitants were reported as Islamic religious followers, with 51.02% of the population confess that belief, while 41.91% practice Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, 1.9% were Protestants and 0.95% Catholic (CSA 2007). From the list stated above, the focus of this undertaking is specifically bent on the Western Gurage wherein *Sebat Bet* Gurage is inhabited.

Some of the major economic activities of the Sabat Bet Gurage ethnic groups include agriculture, animal farming, trade and small house engineering. Especially, the Gurages are known for their extensive cultivation of *Ensete* (false banana or *Ensete edulis* in its scientific name) which is a stable food for many people in the region across deep to the south and central Africa (Shake, 1969). In addition, other groups of Ethiopian nationalities are recognizing the Gurage ethnic groups as the most industrious ethnic groups by.

This paper is primarily based on the empirical data that has been gathered from September 2014-to October 2015 through applying various methods of deep interviews and serious of observations at the shrine of Abret. In a nutshell, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the syncretic processes between different religious denominations that made for the constitution of a new spiritual healing institution of ritually sanctified illnesses. And, methodologically the study also draws attention to the persistent healing practices and the preponderant position that is harbored by the spiritual healers who claim in one way or another, have a close attachment with the leaders of the Abret shrine. For the purpose of this study the concept of syncretism is found fitted through conceiving it could press out the processes of the incorporation of indigenous healing practices to the frame of

Sufi Islam. The etymological definition of the term syncretism that is given by the free encyclopedia defines; it is the combining of different, often mutually exclusive beliefs that amalgamate practices of diverse religious and traditional customs.

### **Processes of accommodating traditional healing practices into Islam**

Before the advent of Christianity and Islam in the Gurage land, the different tribal groups of the Sebat Bet Gurage were worshipers of traditional religions. The three main indigenous cults that had been worshipped by the Sebat Bet Gurage were *Waq*, *Bozhe* and *Demwamit*. People of the Sebat Bet Gurage worshipped the male cult of Ye Chaha *Waq'*, which they believed was more powerful and considered as the god of war. As such, they believed that it could protect them from external attack. According to Shack (1969) *Waq* was the main deity whose spiritual favors to enhance the prestige and valour of tribes who honour him and respect his supernatural powers. The second ritual cult in the Sebat Bet Gurage is called as *Boža* (thunder god) and its representative was known as *Gwetakiya* who was living in a sacred place of Inangara and his assistants were known as *Maga*. The third ritual cult that was represented by the goddess in the Sebat Bet Gurage is *D<sup>e</sup>muwamit* which was the focus of religious activities for Gurage women. The characteristic features: its structure and organizations are the opposite of those of the male cult of *Og'et*. The Gurage concept of *D<sup>e</sup>muwamit* is realized in the manifold expressions of her supernatural power to inflict harm; the consequences evoked if anyone fails in his or her social and ritual duties are epitomized and manifested in the ritual illness of the *Zitānā*.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century the Sufi Islam has been propagated into the Sabat Bet Gurage at the times of the second and third generations of the Abret shrine, sheyikh Bushra and sheyikh Budalla respectively. During this time indigenous religious elements which were found accommodated to the Sufi Islam were taken over in their syncretic forms. The cult of *Waq* (sky god) that was the central force uniting Gurage men of all tribes was Syncretized into the frame of the Qadiryya *teriqa* of the Sufi order. Accordingly, the founders of the Abret shrine, sheyikh Bushra and sheyikh Budalla were appropriated the indigenous religious and healing practices which were related to *Waq* into the structure of Sufi Islam.

The willpower of a spiritual healing force that was adopted from the indigenous belief systems was one of the major criteria to claim the office of a *sheyikh* in the Sufi order. This extraordinary healing power was mostly manifested by the performance of a *karama* (miracle). Thus the primary focus of the oral narratives that share with the miracles of the Abret Sheikh was rotating around his healing ability. Most informants prefer to narrate the healing power of Sheikh Budalla through mentioning the types of sickness that ranging from deafness to mental illness and which were eventually healed by him. There are numbers of oral traditions that handle on the *karama* (miracles) which were conceived to be executed by the Abret Sheikh. One can reason that the performance of *karma* can be seen as the trademark of the Abret Sheyikh through analyzing the manner how the aspirants (*murid*) of the Abret Sheikh express their *sheyikh's* extraordinary power when they narrate about his spiritual leadership qualities.

The Abret *murids* had been visited *sheyikh* Budalla at times of health crisis through seeking his spiritual healing power. The local narratives contended that the healing service of the Abret Sheyikh was not restricted solely to the Muslims, but there were numbers of Christian Gurages who came to him and cured of their ailments. There was some other way of healing from physical or mental illnesses in addition to the personal treatments and Duwa of the Abret Sheikh. The *murids* collected a sample earth (locally termed as *worq afer*) from the soil where the Abret Sheikh walked and they drank or rushed it on the part of their sick body, believing that it could cure them from diverse cases of diseases. Subsequent to his attendance at the annually celebrated *mawulid* at Abret, Shack (1969:193) has underscored his observation on the ritual practices of the pilgrims as follows;

Pilgrims often return with samples of the earth collected from around the shrine, and especially from where Shehoch, has walked, or his sacred white mule has trotted. This earth is held to be sacred. A potion said to have special spiritual and curative powers is made from the sacred earth and is drunk on occasions when a spiritual uplift is needed.

In addition to that, for the purpose of augmenting his spiritual and political power, sayyid Budalla had expanded his area of influence into the districts of Sabat Bet Gurage through adopting indigenous structures into Sufi Islam. Accordingly the agency role of the *maga* was redefined into its Islamic form of the Sufi order that responsible for preaching about Islam and disseminating a religious propaganda about the miraculous spiritual and healing power of sayyid Budalla as he was bestowed by Allah. The *magas*, who came from a specific clan and their office was transferred hereditary through the senior line of the male members, were agents of the *Gwetakuya* in the clan districts of the Sebat Bet Gurage. They provided healing services and ritual protections to the adherents of *Bozhe* who were thought to be inflicted by sacred illnesses and reciprocally they collected tributes under the authority of the ritual functionary.

In view of that, *sheyikh* Budalla adapted the institutional structure of *maga* ritual agents within the framework of Sufi Islam and he then appointed some of the *hadims*, who acquired traditional religious knowledge in Abret, as his ritual agents in the clan districts of the Sebat Bet Gurage. After the religious agents of

Abret established themselves that was resulted by the foundation of a *zawiya* in plots of lands acquired either through purchase or endowment (*waqif*), they evolved into a new religious status of deputy *sheyikh* (*naib*). One of the contributing factors for the transformed status of the religious agents into the deputy *sheyikh* status in their respective district was because they received the blessings (*baraka*) of *sheyikh* Budalla to give spiritual healing services. Despite the fact that their religious authority was limited to their respective clan district that was delineated by the Abret *Sheyikh*.

Due to the fact that some of the deputy *sheyikhs* had kinship ties with *sheyikh* Budalla, they shared the honorific title of *sayyid*, an Arabic word that is used to connote the renowned Sufi *sheyikhs* and their families who establish shrines of the Sufi orders in Ethiopia as well as in the Islamic world to imply they were descendants of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). This special relation with the family of *sheyikh* Budalla made eligible the deputy *sheyikhs* to receive the additional acquiescence from *sheyikh* Budalla that dignified them with traditional and spiritual healing power. They have been provided the curing services of various kinds of diseases not only to the Muslims of the Sebat Bet Gurage, but also to the adherents of other religions who believed on the healing power of the deputy *sheyikhs*.

The healing practices of the authorized deputy *sheyikhs* who were provided it by combining the traditional and spiritual curing methods has been increased, particularly since the controversial disappearance of *sheyikh* Budalla that was concurrently resulted by the cessation of the healing power service of *sheyikh* Budalla which had been associated more often than not with miracles (*karama*). Along with the controversial disappearance of Budalla, his aspirants were shifted to the authorized deputy *sheyikhs* seeking their healing power, believing that they received the blessings (*baraka*) and authorization of *sheyikh* Budalla for their effective curing power. Currently, other than the authorized deputy *sheyikhs* who are known by their curative practices, *seyyid* Miqbas, who is the eldest son of *sheyikh* Budalla has giving the spiritual healing service, besides receiving gifts during *mawulid* by representing the family of Budalla in Abret, albeit he has been claimed his father's spiritual position many times.

As it is discussed previously, during the process of the propagation of Islam in the Sabat Bet Gurage, the cult of Waq was Syncretized into the frame of the Sufi Islam in which the Qadiriyya brotherhood was made. In the like style, while the operation of the syncretization of Islam with local customs was taking place, the cult of *damwamit*, which was a female deity of fertility and healing, was accommodated to the frame of Islam. At some point in this process, the third generation of Abret was appropriated the *demwamit* cult into the frame of Sufi Islam in two perspectives. In the first situation, the female cult of the Sufi order was found fitted to the *damwamit* goddess of the Gurage that resulted for Muslim women to shift their worshipping practices from *Yawaye Demam* (ritual functionary of *damwamit*) into the cult of *sitty* Fatima, who was the daughter of Prophet Mohammed (PUH). Secondly, the healing practice of *zeet* ritual illness, which was believed to be induced by the curse of *damwamit*, was defined into the extraordinary curing power of Sufi Islam that is possessed by spiritual leaders who receive the Baraka (blessing) from the genealogical line of the Prophet.

In Sufi Islam the spiritual position given to *sitty* Fatima is very high that might also be juxtaposed with the religious leadership role of her sons, Hassen and Hussien. In his volume of the historical dictionary of Sufism, Renard (2005:87-88) has glorified Fatima Bint Mohammed as the “most famous daughter of the Prophet, wife of Ali, mother of Hassan and Husayn. She has been regarded as one of the four “ideal” women of paradise (along with Asiya wife of Pharaoh; Mary, Mother of Jesus; and Khadija; the Prophet's first wife). Tradition attributes a number of marvels to her, and she has been an important model of female piety and sanctity for many of the women of Sufism”.

All the same, the transformation from the worshipping of the *demwamit* cult into the ritual of *yishta derema* in commemorating *sitty* Fatima was evidenced a gradual process of change. As it was narrated by informants the main worshipers of *sitty* Fatima are married women, which was resulted from the belief that *sitty* Fatima is considered as a mother of fertility that is related with child birth. According to the accounts of informants, until recently unmarried Muslim Gurages were recruited for the service of the cult of *demwamit* by the male *mwayat* (agent of *Yawaydemam*). At the day of their ritual celebration the *mwayats* were speaking a secret language, which was named as *fedwat*, and roam around in singing, praying and adoring *demwamit*. However, currently the Gurage Muslim women abandoned worshipping *demwamit* and even most of them consider it as the ritual practice of the Christians.

Thus, Muslim women of the Sabat Bet Gurage have begun to hold a monthly ritual ceremony that is locally termed as *yishta derema*, which is celebrated in commemoration to the honorific personality of *sitty* Fatima in Sufi Islam. The term *yishta derema* literally is defined as women's contribution group. Unlike the *magargabaya* weekly *duwa* session that its formula and application is radiated from the Abret mosque, the *yishta derema* is celebrated by groups of Muslim women who are gathering from the same or neighboring villages and celebrate the ritual moving from one household to another on a monthly basis through keeping the pattern. Like the local *sheyikhs* who take the responsibility to lead the regular daily prayer and other ritual ceremonies that are held out at village levels, there are ritual leaders of the women's groups who are locally named as *awu gered*.

The *awu gered*s coordinate the monthly *derema* that is circulated between members of the group, the performance of special *duwa* to the pregnant woman and the *samar* ritual rite.

The ritual celebration of *yishta derema*, it is sometimes called as *yishta duwa*, is taking place on the date of Thursday once per a month. The *awu gered* informs to her ritual group who would prepare for the next *yishta duwa* session one month beforehand to give her enough time for the preparation. The ritual of *yishta duwa* is not celebrated at local mosques or *zawiyya*, that are mostly used by male prayers, instead it is held at the home of the woman who take the responsibility for the provision of the observance. The woman who accepts her turn for the next *yishta duwa* that would be celebrated at her home makes some arrangements in cleaning her house and cooking specially prepared foods such as pancake bread (*wusa*), very refined bread (*teqrya*) which persists longer in the ground, a mixture of butter, yogurt and cabbage (*zimuwamejat*) and brewing coffee.

The members of the *yishta derema* also gather to make *duwa* for the safe deliverance of a pregnant woman who inhabit the village. During their prayer session, the women's groups of *yishta duwa* appeal to sitty Fatima assisting the pregnant women at the time of her delivery. This ritual of the pregnant woman is celebrated on the seventh month of the gestation. The same character of ritual is celebrated in different parts of Africa where the indigenized form of Sufi Islam is established. For instance, Holy (2006:313) has pointed out the ritual ceremony among the Berti of Sudan as follows;

The pregnancy ritual, the *tingkeban*, is conducted by village midwives, the *paraji*, and is ideally performed on day 7, 17 or 27 of the seventh Islamic month of pregnancy at 7 a.m. As with all the birth rituals, the *tingkeban* is framed as Muslim through the use of Muslim prayers recited in Arabic, where the two most frequently used prayers are the *Ayat Kursi* and the *Ayat 15*.

The disease of *zeet* that conceived to be made by the *Demwamit* was highly revered and was believed that it could be only cured by the intercession of the *Yawaydemam*. Nevertheless, with the integration of Islam in the *Sabat Bet Gurage*, some of the families of the *Abret Sheyikh* had received *ijaza* (permission) from *sheyikh Budalla* to enact as his agent and to give spiritual healing services. Because the deputy sheyikhs has claimed that they begun to heal the disease of '*zeet*' those Muslims who belonged to the *Yawaydemam* seeking his aid in curing the *zeetene* at once turned to the deputy sheyikhs of *Abret*. With the accommodation of the healing mechanisms of the diseases of *zeet*, the spiritual leaders of *Abret* redefined its cause in terms of the Sufu Islam that diverted the assumption of the causal agent of the disease was the curse of *damwamit*. Consequently, the deputy *sheyikhs* claim that the various types of satan (*jinn*) are considered to be the causal agencies of such cases of diseases and it could be only cured with the handling of the *Quran* and other religious texts (*kitab*) besides the use of herbals.

### **Contemporary spiritual healing practices at Abret shrine**

As it was accounted by informants, most Muslims have faith on spiritual healers than visiting modern health centers when they feel ill. One can mention some factors that resulted for the preference of the spiritual healers in the rural community, that may include the Muslims build trust on the competency of the spiritual healers believing that their power was granted from Allah, besides the affordable price they need to pay to the service when compared with the relatively expensive modern health service.

In the previous section, a discussion was made in the process of the syncretization of indigenous religious institutions into the frame of Sufi Islam, which has been spearheaded by the spiritual leaders of *Abret*. In due processes of accommodation, the spiritual leaders of *Abret* either appropriated or adopted ritual elements from the three ritual cults of *Waq*, *Demwamit* and *Bozhe* and then they defined it into the frame of Sufi Islam. This process of the Islamization of the indigenous ritual institutions is holistic in its nature, besides its religious functions, it includes ritual institutions of healing and justice. At the present time the healing practices that result from the developments cited in this paper have formed their own peculiar shapes and features. Hence, established in the accounts of informants, the healing practices in contemporary *Sabat Bet Gurage* can be framed in the discussion that is illustrated below.

In the first place, the healing practices that are provided at the *Abret shrine* have been given a preponderant position among the Muslim *Gurages*. Most *murids* (aspirants) of the *Abret Sheyikh* still believe in the extraordinary healing power of the families of *sheyikh Budalla*, they visit the *Sheyikh's* relatives who claim to possess this power to cure ailments. *Sayyid Miqbas* is one of the families of the *Abret Sheyikh*, who give spiritual healing services not only to the Muslims, but also to the adherents of other religions. *Sayyid Miqbas*, who is the elder son of *sheyikh Budalla*, gives medicines for various types of illnesses such as mental disorder, paralysis, back-pain, liver diseases and cancer. Mental illnesses are viewed equally the outcome of malevolent spirits that are fixed into its Islamic forms named as *jinn*, and are treated with prayers. In addition to scriptural texts and prayers, *Miqbas* uses herbal and animal remedies for treating many diseases. Hence, the Syncretized forms of healing practice that combine spiritual healing power and the traditional knowledge of local medicine by *sayyid Miqbas* has contributed for the multitude of his clients who come from different religious denominations.



Also, among the deputy *sheyikhs* who were appointed by *sayyid* Budalla as his agents (*naib*) in various districts of the Sabat Bet Gurage, there are even some of them pass on spiritual healing services claiming that the Abret Sheyikh had granted them permission (*ijaza*). Considering the extraordinary healing power, the deputy *sheyikhs* claim that they belong to the same clan of the Abret Sheyikh which was believed to be genealogically descended from the Qurayyish tribe of the Prophet, and then his *baraka* was transformed to them through this line. Some of the deputy *sheyikhs* are known by their specialization in healing illnesses. For instance, *sayyid* Fereh, who is the cousin of the Abret Sheyikh is known by his spiritual skill of healing a mentally disordered person. There are more deputy *sheyikhs* in different districts of the Sabat Bet Gurage who are nominated by the locality they inhabit, for illustration, *ya qafa sheyikh* (to name the *sheyikh* of the locality of Qafa), *ya Kahsay sheyikh* (the *sheyikh* of Kahsay locality). The spiritual position of these *sheyikhs* is mainly associated with healing services.

In addition to the personal healing services that are put up by the families of the Abret Sheyikh, the Muslims of the Sabat Bet Gurage use two main sacred objects, earth sample of the Qubba sanctuary and *qulet* spring water, to heal illnesses. When pilgrims come to Qubba and finish their ritual prayer, they come out of the ritual area of the sanctuary by collecting samples of the sacred earth from the ground of the sanctuary. While male pilgrims collect samples of the earth from the ground of tombs, the women collect it from the ground of the fence of the sanctuary. Most pilgrims believe that this particle of soil, commonly known as *werq-afar* (the golden-soil), is sacred and have special spiritual and curative power. According to the accounts of some informants, the pilgrims take the sample earth of Qubba to their home and use it in two forms; either they use it in liquid form by mixing with the holy water of *qulet* or on its dry form rush it on the part of the body they feel pain. The use of earth sample collected from the sanctuary of Qubba for healing practice is resembles with the healing practice of the Orthodox Church its adherents use two types of sacred elements, incense ashes and soil, together known as *emnet*.

### Conclusion

In the present situation, the various forms of spiritual healing practices are continuing vital among the Muslims of the Sabat Bet Gurage. The long process of syncretic mechanics and accommodation of indigenous belief systems into the frame of the Sufi Islam is one of the contributing factors for the longevity of the spiritual healing practices in the Abret shrine. For most of the aspirants of *sayyid* Budalla, beyond its function in curing illnesses, the spiritual healing also augments their mental readiness to perform regular religious rituals. Contrary to the optimistic notion of the Sufis, the reformist groups of the Salafis have made a serious criticism of the spiritual healing practices at Abret shrine. The Salafi reformist groups firmly contend that the spiritual healing practices given by the families of the Abret Sheyikh are unorthodox practices in Islam and it is considered as a *bida'a* (innovation). On its counter argument, the Sufi groups have refuted the critics presented by the Salafi groups on the question of the authenticity of the spiritual healing practices, through arguing that the religious leaders of Abret are treating their clients based on Quran and other Islamic scriptures, hence it is part of authentic Islamic practice.

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