

# Sharing the Faith – Religion and Ethnicity in the City of Harar [1]

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In 1856, Sir Richard Burton described the Harari as a bigoted and xenophobic population; a 'distinct race of 8000 souls' speaking a 'peculiar dialect confined within the walls' (1987, Vol. II, 15-18). The walls were those built in the 16th century to demarcate and protect the Harari homeland; a city in the highlands of eastern Ethiopia which Burton describes as 'the ancient metropolis of a once mighty race, the only permanent settlement in Eastern Africa, the reported seat of Muslim learning, a walled city of stone houses ... the emporium of the coffee trade, (and) the head-quarters of slavery' (ibid, Vol. I, xxvi).

Over a hundred years later, the Harari are described by the anthropologist Sidney Waldron, in much the same terms. He writes that this 'single city culture' of at least 15,000, effectively remains a self governing community aloof from the central administration; 'closed' through a strict preference for endogamy and the exclusion of others from its primary forms of social organization: the family, the friendship group and the community observance association, or afocha (1975, vii, ix, 111)[2] Waldron introduces us to the Harari in their own terms, as the *Ge usu* 'or, 'people of the city.'

In many ways, the boundedness, exclusivity, and xenophobia of the population Waldron describes is not dissimilar from that portrayed by Burton a hundred years earlier. What he does, however, is assert that the *Ge usu* 'are ostensibly a class category and that 'ethnic differences are class differences in and around Harar' (ibid., 108). The *Ge usu* 'are situated at the apex of a pyramid of ethnic stratification in a position of privilege and prestige which is sustained through a monopoly Over local resources. As wealthy landowners employing Oromo as tenant farmers, and as merchants dominating inter-ethnic trade in Harar, the *Ge usu* 'guard their position, suggests Waldron, by excluding outsiders and employing their language as a secret code of communication (ibid., 6-7). Class, in Waldron's analysis, is realized through the degree of participation in the kinship, friendship and afocha organizations of the *Ge usu*'. Collectively these form a system of overlapping networks through which members are situated in the community.

The historic literature suggests that the *Ge usu* 'are in fact multiethnic in origin, most likely the product of intermarriage between Arab immigrants and local residents (see for example, Bardey 1897; Cerulli 1941) and strategic inter-ethnic marital alliances (Hassen 1980; Waldron 1984). Centuries of common residence and religious worship have, additionally, served to minimize differences, or more accurately, contributed to 'aspects of common culture shared between residents in Harar. While difference between groups is primarily socioeconomic, in overemphasizing this, the fact that much of what is central to the religious and cultural life of the *Ge usu* 'is in fact shared across differences of ethnicity and class, goes unrecognized.

Viewing the *Ge usu* 'as a rigidly defined category fails, furthermore, to acknowledge that the category is in fact an assimilative one into which non-*Ge usu* ' individuals may become enculturated through specific means.

*Ge limaad*, 'learning the city,' or the way of life of its people, is the local means through which outsiders who aspire to the prestige category can 'become' *Ge usu*'. The fact that *Ge limaad* is recorded in Leslau's etymological dictionary of Harari suggests that this process was, at least as of the mid-1960s, a recognized phenomenon. *Ge limaad* requires internalizing the local religious orthodoxy, conforming to the precepts of *Ge ada*' (the 'culture of the city'), speaking the 'language of the city,' *Ge sinan*, identifying the city as the source of one's heritage, participating in the basic forms of social organization of *Ge usu* ' life identified by Waldron and, as I discuss below, being a resident of a neighbourhood.

In my observations, while perhaps still desirable, a pretence to ethnic exclusivity is difficult to maintain in present day Harar. Within those traditional institutions discussed by Waldron the degree of *Ge usu* ' purity may still persist as an issue at a theoretical level, but it is a question of degree, and contextually defined and dependent. *Ge usu*', as a category associated with wealth, prestige and literacy, remains a desirable category into which some individuals aspire to assimilate. Despite the economic restructuring brought about under the socialist dictatorship (1974-1991)

known as the Dergue,[3] the *Ge usu'* remain a relatively wealthy community - residing in the most desirable areas of the city, employed in prestigious professions as merchants, traders, and administrators, rather than in farming or other forms of manual labour or servitude, hosting expensive and elaborate wedding ceremonies, and displaying material wealth in dress, domestic architecture, and acquisitions, including souvenirs procured during the pilgrimage to Mecca[4] and sent from relatives abroad. Their wealth today, however, is largely supported by remittances from abroad, where approximately a third of their population now resides.[5]

Waldron states that observable differences in wealth among *Ge usu'* are difficult to discern, and that every attempt is made to conceal such differences (1975, 110)[6] The overall effect, however, is still the appearance of remarkable homogeneity, where no *Ge usu'* appear to be destitute, homeless, begging in the street or employed in positions of servitude.[7] The maintenance of *Ge usu'* prestige is less the result of rigorous social and economic strategies consciously designed to keep distance between themselves and others, however, than it is the result of inclusive processes and accommodating strategies through which difference (both within the community and between communities in Harar) is negotiated.

As a minority population, a 'Semitic island in a Cushitic sea' (Leslau 1958, 1-2), and the historic rulers of a strategic site at various times overtaken by the Egyptians, the British, the Amhara, the Italians and the Somali,[8] the *Ge usu'* have been involved in ongoing processes of negotiating relations with outsiders and mediating varied cultural influences, filtering and recontextualizing them in ways which serve to uphold the integrity of Ge'ada, the culture of the city. Local religious orthodoxy is particularly fluid, flexible and heterogeneous, and provided a framework through which the threat of difference and annihilation of the group can be transformed and often overturned.

### **Inter-Ethnic Relations in Historic Perspective**

Harar has served as the centre of the Hararghe region and a regional subcentre within both the Christian Empire (1887-1974) and the socialist state (1974-1991). Much of the historiography of Harar documenting events prior to its incorporation in 1887 is dominated by attention to conflict between the *Ge usu'* and external forces as they struggled to maintain their autonomy from the Christian state and dominate the local political economy.

From its foundation in the 9th century, the city developed into a seat of Islamic scholarship and authority, from where missionaries actively campaigned for the conversion of the surrounding Oromo populations and waged episodic jihads against the expanding Christian Empire. The most famous of these was the brutal campaign of mass forced conversion led by Imam Ahmed al Ghazi, or Gagn as he is known, while Harar was the capital of the Adal Sultanate from 1529 to 1543. The Jihad was so forceful and effective that, as Hassen states, '(It) threatened the very survival of the Christian state in north east Africa for 15 years,' (1980,228; Pankhurst 1982,49).

Intense rivalry between Christians and Muslims in the Horn was largely motivated by the quest to secure control over the lucrative caravan routes to the coast (Hassen 1980, 22). For centuries, Harar was strategically placed as a major post on one of the two major arterials linking the northern and southern spheres of the Ethiopian polity (Zewde 1991, 21/2). By virtue of its advantageous position and political importance as a long-standing city-state with established connections to both the interior and the coast, Harar developed into a thriving commercial centre under the independent dynasty established in 1647 (Ahmed 1960, 33; Hassen 1980, 228/9). In the city's markets, the interaction, negotiation and exchange of goods, services and information from and between different regions and groups in Ethiopia was strictly regulated and guarded by the *Ge usu'* Amirate.

From the 16th century on, however, Harar was in a precarious position struggling to maintain control over lucrative trade routes while involved in ongoing conflict with warring Oromo groups (Caulk 1977, 369). Internal hostilities arose as the Amirate necessarily formed alliances with Oromo, weakening the political integrity of the state. When the Egyptian army seized Zeila and Berbera, the ports upon which Harari trade was dependent, Amir Mohammed abandoned efforts to resist foreign occupation and the Egyptians seized the city in October 1875.

With the abolition of the Amirate, the independence of Harar was undermined and never fully reinstated (Hassen 1980,232). While the Amirate was briefly resurrected by the British following the Egyptian evacuation in 1885, the state had been so weakened that Menelik seized upon the opportunity to annex the regional subcentre (ibid.,; Zewde 1991, p.20). At Che1enko"Menelik's 20,000 troops easily defeated the 3-4,000 foot soldiers rallied together by the

Amir (Hassen 1980, 235). The Muslim city was thus incorporated into the Christian Empire in January of 1887 and Menelik employed his cousin, Balambaras (later to become Ras) Makonnen Walda-Mikael as governor of the new Ethiopian province (Caulk 1971, 15; Pankhurst 1985,255; Zewde 1991,63/4). Thereafter, the *Ge usu'* were effectively stripped of any sense of power beyond the tokenism of limited places in public office (Pankhurst 1985, 256).

The standard historiography suggests the increasing marginalization of Harar vis-à-vis the Imperial state. This was compounded by a shift of trade and population to Dire Dawa with the building of the railway from Addis Ababa through Dire Dawa, rather than Harar, to the coast in the early 1900s. Up until this time, farming had been the most honourable profession for *Ge usu'* men, and both farming and the trade in fresh produce and imported goods were dominated by *Ge usu'*. With the relocation of demand for agricultural produce and the increasing demand for cheap, imported goods which came by rail to Dire Dawa, most of the remaining *Ge usu'* farmers moved into mercantilism and rented their farmlands to Oromo tenants. Harar, which was Ethiopia's second largest city at the beginning of Haile Selassie's regime, had thus, by the beginning of the Mengistu era, been superseded in size and importance by Asmara and Dire Dawa (Donham 1986, 32). While the city had been relegated to a position of minor importance in Imperial terms, the *Ge usu'* continued to dominate neighbouring populations in the local political economy.

### **The Mengistu Era and Beyond**

In the post-Mengistu era, Harar and its environs, some 360km<sup>2</sup> including the original walled city, the new city which has developed over the last century beyond its walls, and the surrounding agricultural lands traditionally owned by the *Ge usu'*, has been designated as one of the nine autonomous regions of the 'New Ethiopia.'<sup>[9]</sup> In recognition of their historic preeminence, the *Ge usu'* have been granted the right to rule over the city which they identify as their homeland and the region which has historically been under its jurisdiction.

Ethnographic and historic insights into relations in Harar during the Mengistu era are conspicuously absent.<sup>[10]</sup> While it can be argued that the traditions of the city have largely been shaped by *Ge usu'* from their position of historical dominance over neighbouring groups in the area, reforms introduced during the Mengistu era have significantly impacted upon the ways in which local populations interact and are defined in relation to one another. Transformations in socio-economic structures, inter-ethnic relations, and population distributions in Harar, have made the current designation of the *Ge usu'*, as the rulers of a region in which they now represent a numeric minority, problematic, though not so much between ethnic groups in Harar as we might expect, but within the *Ge usu'* community itself. The reforms of the Dergue era have effectively served to minimize some of the locally generated economically based differences between groups in Harar, and served to foster greater commonality, and in some cases solidarity between them. as they shared common experiences and united in opposition to central rule.

With the introduction of the Dergue's land reform policies, the ethno-structural relations which kept Oromo in a position of effective serfdom vis-à-vis *Ge usu'* landowners were undermined as rights to land ownership were seized from absentee landlords. While the basic economic structure through which relations between *Ge usu'* and Oromo have been organized was dramatically altered, many creative strategies were employed whereby *Ge usu'* retained nominal or de facto control over their lands. Through registering multiple plots in the names of various family members, subdividing larger plots into the 10 hectares<sup>[11]</sup> allowed as private ownership, establishing individual contracts with their Oromo tenants, and in rare cases, sending sons to work their lands,<sup>[12]</sup> *Ge usu'* were able to retain some control over much of their land and ensure the continuation of a supply of produce for household consumption and sale in the market.

In many cases, *Ge usu'* who were rendered landless, moved to the larger urban centres of Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa in search of greater economic-opportunity. Increasing economic marginalization of *Ge usu'* in Harar has perhaps been the greatest pull factor in the emigration to the larger urban centres of Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa, where sizeable *Ge usu'* neighbourhoods now exist. Push factors however, particularly political persecution for opposition to the Dergue, and fear of recruitment into the Dergue's army, have forced a comparable number of individuals, particularly younger men, even further afield. Approximately a third of the *Ge usu'* population remains in Harar today (CSA 1994). Forced resettlement has simultaneously brought thousands of Amhara into the region, and in the old and new cities combined, Oromo and Amhara currently constitute the majority of the population. The visible presence of the officers of state -- the *neftennya* settlements around the old city established during Emperor

Minilik's reign -- compounds a sense of 'native' referring to all peoples of Harar in opposition to the Amhara soldiers and settlers.

At a political, level, individuals of non-Amhara extraction and aspiration across the country have shared common experiences of oppression under the Dergue: of being subject to an intense campaign of Amharization and the denial of non-Amhara languages and cultures, of participation in pan-ethnic anti-Dergue political movements such as the EPRP, of forced recruitment of their young men into Mengistu's militia, and of mass annihilation at the hands of Dergue officials for expressions of dissent. Being united in the face of a common enemy has undoubtedly fostered a sense of identification and purpose between members of different ethnic groups on many different levels.

For many Muslim youth of the city who have received their primary education in Arabic together in the traditional *Ge usu'* Qur'anic school, and their secondary education together in Amharic and English, the language of ethnicity is most often phrased in terms of Amhara versus non-Amhara.[13] Friendship groups, most important amongst young men and women, are now rarely totally ethnically homogenous, and often include Ge usu', Oromo and Somali age mates. Many of the *afochach*, the single-sex community observance associations of adult (married) *Ge usu'* men and women, are similarly no longer ethnically exclusive, and well integrated Somali and Oromo can and do become members of *Ge afochach*. In some cases, Oromo have adopted the *Ge usu'* social institution and formed *afochach* of their own. In these ways ethnic exclusivity is inclusive of long standing Muslim populations and exclusive of Amhara, who are distanced as Christians, invaders and newcomers.

### **Contemporary Politics in Harar**

The reality of the city's ethnically mixed population has led to a clear division within the *Ge usu'* community between those who support the exclusivity of *Ge usu'* rights to authority over the region on the basis of their historical dominance, and those claiming rule over Harar should reflect the diverse origins of the group and the diverse populations which the city has come to house over the centuries. Both sides of this debate, which has become manifest in political terms, depend upon reflexive thinking about the history of the city and its people, and for *Ge usu'* today, the delineation of themselves as a group relies largely upon the use of images of collective history which legitimate the autonomy of their group in the New Ethiopia through reference to their past independence.

After 1991, *Ge usu'* formed a political body modelled as an umbrella organization for the existing *afochach*, known as the Harari National League. In 1992, tensions within the League arose with regard to the ethnic exclusivity of its membership and aims, and led to the formation of what ultimately became an opposition party - the Harari Democratic Unity Party, or Hadiyuppa. This tension prohibited agreement on the election of a Provisional Regional Council to represent the region in the pre-Election period (1991-5) and in response, the Transitional Government gave authority to the League, as the dominant political body of the *Ge usu'*, to appoint their own council members. As such, this arrangement gave the party control over the administration of the region during the transitional period and further, ensured that *Ge usu'* would effectively control the region by holding an ethnically-based right to veto power in the administration voted into place in June 1995. [14]

The League chose members of their own party for the Provisional Regional Council, thereby excluding Hadiyuppa supporters from participation in the pre-election administration --and causing considerable conflict within the community. Largely on the basis of their visibility during the pre-election period, League members secured all seats open to them during the 1995 election.

Despite the relative weakness of their rivals, however, the conflict did serve to illuminate latent differences within the community. In very simple terms, the League, as a nationalist party, seeks to reinstate indigenous rule over Harar and its environs demarcated as Region 13. While securing rule over the Region, the party seeks to unite all *Ge usu'* on the basis of shared history and culture. The party's broad base of local membership is thus strengthened by support from the *Ge usu'* communities resident in Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa and abroad. Hadiyuppa is a locally based party, whose membership, although primarily *Ge usu'*, cuts across ethnic lines.

Hadiyuppa and the League ultimately differ on their vision of historic and contemporary ethnic relations in Harar. In Hadiyuppan terms, to be Harari is to reside and identify with the life of the city, which does not necessarily

demand identifying as *Ge usu'*. The recognition of the present multi-ethnic constitution of the city refers to a historical perspective which emphasizes the interaction of various ethnic groups and the local and national economics and politics which have brought them together. This makes the 'democracy' of ethnically based privileges to govern on the basis of an earlier economically defined ethnic hierarchy at least questionable, if not, for many members of the community, untenable given the degree to which ethno-structural relations have shifted throughout this century.

Restoring control of the city to the *Ge usu'*, however, recognizes their former preeminence and redresses the historical wrong of their enforced incorporation and subjugation. The League's demand to reestablish *Ge usu'* as the rightful rulers over the city over which they formerly governed relies upon a particular rendition of the past which projects imagery which is suggestive of the injustice of their defeat and incorporation, and is captured symbolically in campaign language.[15] Addressing the population as a persecuted minority, two thirds of whom now live outside Harar, allows the League to use historical references as the basis of an effective and emotive appeal.

The Battle of Chelenko serves as the primary point of reference and dominant metaphor used by the League to encapsulate the dialectic between *Ge usu'* and the Ethiopian state. While the effects of the Mengistu era upon the city and its inhabitants are dramatic in and of themselves, they appear to be contextualized within this broader perspective of a near century of foreign domination.

In the present era, where the politics of autonomous rule necessitate a common orientation toward historical circumstances, imagery related to the Battle of Chelenko is constantly invoked in both political and popular discourse. *Ge usu'* have long been reminded on a daily basis of the Battle by the red earth floor, or *qeh afar*, which is found in every *Ge gar*, or traditional 'house of the city,' symbolizing the loss of *Ge usu'* blood shed in this pivotal battle. This imagery has been appropriated into the public sphere by the Harari National League who initially employed its imagery on their flag: a red stripe across the top of the flag symbolizing the blood shed at the battle, and a black stripe across the bottom representing the deaths incurred at the hands of the Christian invaders.[16]

By making interpretations of history a part of daily life, in this case through domestic architecture, and framing them in terms of 'tradition' and culture, *Ge usu'* are reminded every day of their shared history in these particular terms. Since local history has been one of increasing distance between the *Ge usu'* and their traditional bases of wealth and authority, the exegesis accompanying these symbols has remained relevant, emotive and immediately accessible.

Reference to this, and other symbols,[17] effectively evokes a memory of invasion and defeat used to support the case for the reestablishment of self-government. While they are essential in terms of the narrative of relations between Harar, the *Ge usu'*, and the centre, however, these same symbols can be interpreted in terms of what they say about the relationship between the *Ge usu'* and their city in regional terms, *vis-à-vis* neighbouring populations. Many Oromo in the region share the view that the defeat at Chelenko led to the dehumanization and subjugation of their people under Amhara administration.[18] While oral tradition amongst the *Ge usu'* states that it was 700 of their sons who lost their lives in battle,[19] Mohammed Hassen notes that the force was some 3,000-4,000 Muslims, including *Ge usu'*, Oromo and Somali who were called by Amir Abdullahi to jihad (1980, 235). Hassen recounts that even within some *Ge usu'* accounts, the occasion is viewed in terms of its success as a test of Muslim unity; the first battle in which *Ge usu'*, Oromo and Somali 'fought together and died together' in the interest of Islam (1973,52-55).

This suggests some decades of religio-political alliance since the time of incorporation and prior to the Mengistu era. This is exemplified not only in war, however, but in times of relative peace. In living together in neighbourhoods and partaking in common religious worship at the same sites, ethnic differences are largely rendered irrelevant (Gibb 1997; 1999). Evidence of this suggests that a sense of common identification across ethnic lines has developed for reasons in addition to those shifts in relations brought about through recent decades of political and economic change and upheaval.

## **Saints and Neighbours**

The move to restore autonomous rule to the *Ge usu'* requires a reconstruction of borders between Muslim groups in Harar. While the political changes and repercussions of the Mengistu era have restructured the economic relations upon which much ethnic distinction in Harar is based, inter-ethnic relations fostered through centuries of interaction in trade, and commonality afforded through co-residence and shared religious orthodoxy, had, I would argue, already done much to obscure definitive borders between ethnic groups in Harar.

In addition to the family, friendship group and *afocha*, religious and residential identities appear to be critical to the integration of individuals into the *Ge usu'* community. Belonging to a neighbourhood, or *toya* (*toyach*, pl.), and adhering to the local religious orthodoxy founded on beliefs and practices regarding local saints are, however, equally as important for Oromo and Somali residents of Harar and not bound or determined in any way by membership, or non-membership, in any of the above social institutions.

Within its walls, the city is divided into *toyach*, many of which are oriented around the shrines of local saints who in turn constitute the primary point of reference for local Islamic beliefs and practices. Each *toya* has its conceptual boundaries, its informal membership and a reputation or character referred to by members of other *toyach*. In the old city of Harar, before the mass emigration of *Ge usu'* in the 1970s and 80s, *Ge usu'* appear, according to Waldron's observations, to have been able to maintain borders between neighbourhoods characterized by their ethnic exclusivity (1975,108/111). The current population distribution within the old city necessitates interaction and co-operation between members of different ethnic groups to a degree so far unparalleled. The *toya*, is in my view, functionally similar to those social forms identified by Waldron in the sense that it encourages social cohesion, and demands interaction and the fulfillment of obligations between its members. It is different in the sense that it does so explicitly across ethnic lines and that it does so not on the basis of any formal membership, but through necessity.

While the ethnic composition of the majority of the traditional *toyach* within the city walls is highly varied, the traditional obligations which *Ge usu'* share as co-residents of the same *toya* continue, despite the mixed composition of a neighbourhood's residents. One is born into a household in a particular *toya*, and it is expected that individuals within the same *toya* will take on particular responsibilities toward each other and toward the upkeep of public property in the neighbourhood. Neighbours share resources where resources are limited. If one household has a piped water source and others do not, access will be granted to neighbours. Good neighbours ensure the street outside their compound is kept clean and free of waste, which is essential in the crowded conditions within the city wall. Neighbourly responsibility, goodwill and propriety are ensured through the gossip of women where comments on behaviour are often phrased as moral judgments, and induce a certain level of conformity.

Taking responsibility for the public property in a neighbourhood includes the upkeep of shrines and mosques around which the majority of neighbourhoods are oriented. At neighbourhood shrines, the greatest level of cooperation is evidenced between what appear to be the most disparate peoples. Across lines of gender, age, ethnicity, class and even political difference, people honour and respect local shrines, worship together, and respect the worship of their neighbours. Local religious experience, largely shrine-based, can be seen as an indirect challenge in a political climate which calls for the reconstruction of borders between groups resident in Harar. Local shrines are most often tended to through making regular *ziara*, or ritualized visits with offerings, on particular days of the week. Shrines need to be swept, protected and repaired, as well as honoured, through bringing incense regularly and offering prayer.

Influential scholars have theorized a typological, two-tiered-existence in which a Great Tradition of formal or orthodox Islam centered around the mosque, presides over a Little Tradition, often referred to as 'popular Islam' into which saint worship (and a vast range of other local cultural practices) fall (e.g. Gerner 1981). The pervasiveness of the shrine as a key social and religious arena in Harar challenges this type of distinction. Local Islamic orthodoxy demands both mosques and shrines be visited - each the site of a different form of prayer and accorded spiritual merit in local terms. That the shrines are neither private, subsumed nor secondary to the mosques is evidenced by the fact that they are the primary sites for the celebration of major religious occasions such as Ashura, Arafat and Mawlid (the Prophet's birthday). On these occasions Muslims of all ethnicities celebrate together in the various languages of the city. While the mosque and the prayer it demands are essential to identity as Muslims, visits to the shrines are essential as Muslims of Harar [20] and as essential whether you are male or female, wealthy or poor, *Ge usu'*, Oromo or Somali. Different saints have different meanings for different people at

varied times, but what is perhaps constant, is that saints embody religious meaning and purpose and the shrines are the primary sites within which Islam is practiced. Inter-ethnic worship derives as much from the fact that the saints are heterogeneous in origin and reflect the diversity of population in Harar as it does from the practical fact that shrines are situated in neighbourhoods, where collective responsibility must be taken by ethnically diverse residents.

While the saints' shrines are individually and collectively known by Muslims in Harar by the *Ge usu'* term awach, (fathers), they do not all represent *Ge usu'* saints. In fact, only one of the more than 300 saints (Gibb 1997; Wagner; Foucher 1984) is known to be of *Ge usu'* origin, while the rest are Oromo, Somali and Arabs, with origins traced to Saudi Arabia, Baghdad, Yemen and Turkey. While some saints are easily identified in terms of their ethnic origin, the nationalities of most saints are largely considered irrelevant. Despite their ethnic diversity, the saints are known amongst *Ge usu'* as their ancestral fathers. All are regarded as powerful agents in the history of the city and representatives of its residents in the spiritual world, though their origins are for the most part not indigenous. In serving the city they 'become' *Ge usu'* - a process which is mirrored by people on the ground.

It appears that belief in the saints provides a means through which foreign presence and influence can be absorbed and reconfigured in local terms, while simultaneously providing heterogeneous populations with tangible constructs through and within which they can see their ancestries reflected.[21] Alternative historical constructions are accommodated since the vast compendium of saints reflects both the exalted past of the *Ge usu'* who are their descendants, and the multi-ethnic origins and existence of life in Harar. Multiple ideologies and mythologies are accommodated and able to coexist within the arena of the saints, as are the disparate peoples who come to worship at the shrines of Harar.

Neighbourhoods, religious sites and institutions, may be organized according to *Ge usu'* principles but they are inhabited and guided by members of various ethnic groups. In this way, what is defined as *Ge usu'* can actually be seen to be derived and shaped by varied cultural influences. As a prestige category, *Ge usu'* continues to embody a class ideal despite the undermining of class structure under the Dergue. *Ge usu'* prestige reflects as much, the religious 'affluence' of the community. While socioeconomic class structures have largely been constructed in ethnic terms, religious hierarchy is not organized or limited by ethnic categorizations. In this realm, status is achieved through scholarship and devotion. Saints, forefathers and religious and community leaders are thus heterodox in origin, reflecting the reality of centuries of inter-ethnic interaction and the multi-ethnic sources which have produced a culture of the city over which *Ge usu'* preside, but do not have exclusive ownership.

## Endnotes

1. This paper is based on a paper I presented at the 13th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in 1997. I am grateful to Wendy James, Mohammed Hassen and Alessandro Triulzi for their comments and suggestions regarding this paper and to Sidney Waldron for his earlier guidance regarding the research upon which this fieldwork was based. This research and its follow-up were made possible through a generous grant from the Harold Hyarn Wingate Foundation, and supplementary grants from the Emslie Homiran Fund of the Royal Anthropological Institute, the Lienhardt Fund at the University of Oxford, and travel grants from Magdalen College and the University of Oxford.

2. The afocha (pI. afochach) is a community observance association whose collective responsibilities primarily revolve around observing and sharing the expenses for weddings and funerals. It is similar in structure to the Christian iddir, or mutual aid society, with formalized membership, where members pay dues and participation is mandatory. Full membership in *Ge usu'* society demands joining an afocha after marriage, though the choice of afocha is a personal one, not necessarily determined by kinship, neighbourhood or friendship ties.

3. Amharic for 'council.' The Provisional Military Council, which oversaw the socialist dictatorship latterly dominated by Mehistu Haile Mariam.

4. While making the pilgrimage is one of the five pillars of faith for those Muslims who are able to afford it, *Ge usu'* do so with greater frequency than their neighbours because of their relative wealth. This confers on them considerable prestige within the community.

5. This estimate was provided to me by *Ge usu'* statisticians working on the 1994 census.
6. While they may be difficult to discern, they are, in my observations nevertheless a constant source of gossip and speculation among women, judged on the basis of subtle differences in things such as the quantity and quality of cloth of a woman's dress, or the intricacy of the embroidery around the cuffs of her trousers, or increasingly, the number of videos or foreign medicines a household possesses.
7. When I asked friends in Harar why there were never *Ge usu'* begging on the street, I was told that no *Ge usu'* would ever let another live in such a shameful way. Members of the population simply don't become homeless and destitute - those who are poor, mentally ill, or diseased, live in the compounds of other *Ge usu'*.
8. The Egyptian occupation of 1875-85 was the first foreign occupation of Harar. The British seized control from the Egyptians and briefly reinstated the Amirate between 1885-87 putting into place little more than a puppet government. In 1887 the city was incorporated into the Christian Empire and the Ethiopia whose borders are roughly those of today. In 1977 the Somali, in their claim for the territorial reclamation of Greater Somalia, occupied Harar for several months.
9. By which I refer to the administrative and political restructuring brought into place by the EPRDF dominated Transitional Government (1991-1995) and the elected government, which derived from it (1995 to date).
10. Scholarly investigation of this sort throughout Ethiopia was largely prevented by political circumstances during the Mengistu era.
11. Most traditional plots were smaller than 10 hectares anyway, so only those larger plots had to be divided. Private ownership was however, restricted to one of these plots, hence the need to divide and register lands in the names of various family members.
12. Sending unmarried sons did not jeopardize the status of either father or son.
13. In the post-Mengistu era, anti-Amhara sentiment is running particularly high, often resulting in violence. At the start of the school year in 1994, several Amhara youth at the Medhane Alem High School were chased, kicked and beaten by youth of other ethnic groups because, in the words of those involved, they were Amhara.
14. In the 1995 election, only *Ge usu'* were eligible to run for those seats on offer inside the city wall, thereby ensuring they would regain control over their traditional homeland. While they still represent the majority of the population inside the ancient city walls, which demarcate their homeland, in the total area of Region 13 they represent only 15% of the total population - far outnumbered by Oromo and Amhara populations (CSA 1984, pp. 34/36). In the rest of the region, an equal number of seats were open to candidates irrespective of ethnic identification. This resulted in the current arrangement in which the League claims all the seats within the city wall and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (the OPDO), hold all the remaining seats in the region. The inner-city council however, as the primary council, is that which can pass laws without needing the consent of the secondary council and has the power to veto motions proposed by them.
15. Slogans such as '*Ge tariqa, habasha tariqa ellum*' (the history of the city of Harar is not the history of Christian Highland Ethiopia) are used to invoke a sense of the earlier autonomy and development of the city.
16. Interestingly, there has been some criticism of the use of what might be construed as negative, defeatist imagery by *Ge usu'* elders resident abroad.
17. The *sati baqla*, for instance, or shawl which is presented to a bridegroom by his father-in-law at the time of marriage, is said to symbolize the blood shed by young newly married men who went to battle to defend their city.
18. Mohammed Hassen, personal communication.

19. Hence the name of the shawl described in endnote,[17] which translates as 700, and refers to the young married men who lost their lives in battle.

20. Harar is not a pilgrimage center - Muslims do not come from outside Harar to visit these shrines.

21. The Amhara, who are numerically much greater than the *Ge usu'* in the combined old and new cities, are the only one of the major ethnic groups who did not have their own local saints in the area. It is not simply that they are Christians, in fact, being Christian does not, as I have witnessed, prevent or prohibit some Amhara from worshipping at Muslim shrines in the city, it is that as invaders and as relative newcomers they do not share the historical experiences of living in the city, nor do they find their ancestry therein.

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