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Camilla C. T. Gibb

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BARAKA WITHOUT BORDERS: INTEGRATING COMMUNITIES IN THE CITY OF SAINTS¹

BY

CAMILLA C.T. GIBB

(University of Toronto)

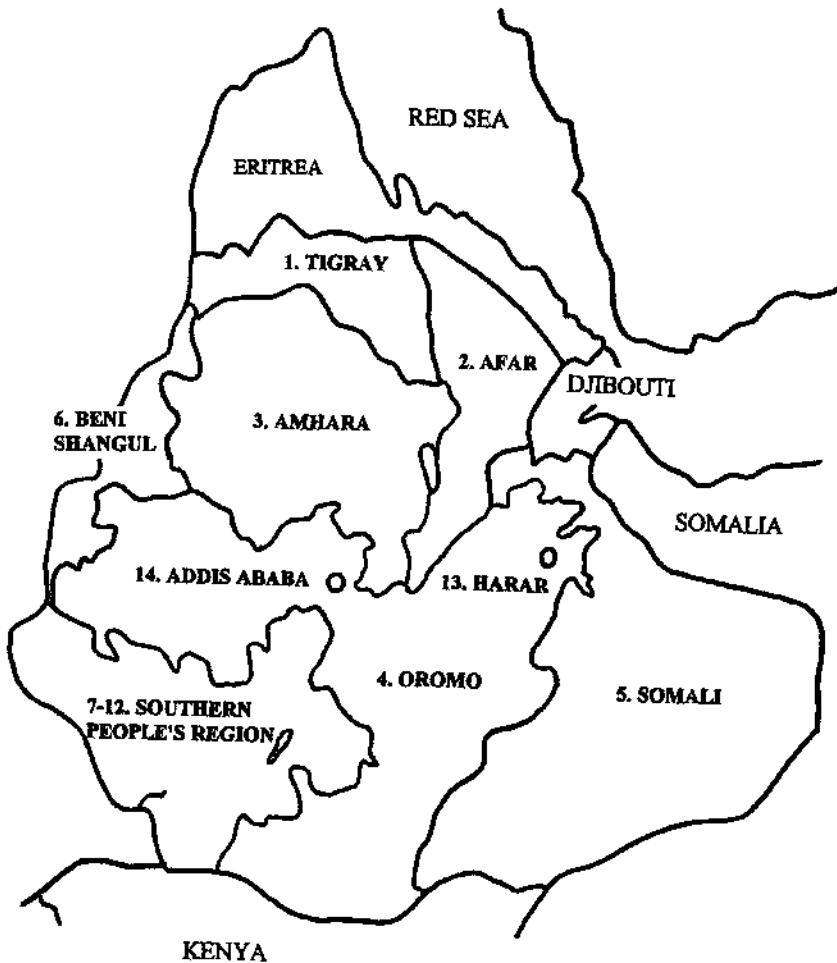
In 1854, Sir Richard Burton set out on an epic journey, the 'First Footsteps' which were to lead him to the fabled Muslim city of Harar in the highlands of eastern Ethiopia. As

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, possessing its independent chief, its peculiar population, its unknown language, its own coinage, the emporium of the coffee trade, (and) the headquarters of slavery²

its reputation held much appeal to the Orientalist imagination. He refers variously to the city as 'forbidden', 'unknown', and 'under a guardian spell';³ a city fiercely guarded by a bigoted and xenophobic population who are a 'distinct race of 8000 souls' speaking a 'peculiar dialect confined within the walls'.⁴

Not until the 1970s is the population introduced to a western audience in its own terms, as the *Gē usu*,⁵ or 'people of the city'. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the mid 1960s, Sidney Waldron writes that this single city population of at least 15,000 effectively remains a self-governing community aloof from the central administration, and 'closed' through a strict preference for endogamy and by excluding others from its primary forms of social organization.⁶

In many ways, the boundedness, exclusivity, and xenophobia of the population described in the 1960s is not dissimilar to that portrayed by Burton a hundred years earlier. What Waldron does, however, is to assert that the *Gē usu* are ostensibly a class category and that 'ethnic differences are class differences in and around Harar'.⁷ The *Gē 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



Map 1 - Administrative Regions of the New Ethiopia

tenant farmers, and as merchants dominating inter-ethnic trade in Harar, the *Gē usu'* guard their position, suggests Waldron, by excluding outsiders and employing their language as a secret code of communication.⁸

The historic literature suggests that the *Gē usu'* are in fact multi-ethnic in origin, most likely the product of intermarriage between Arab immigrants and local residents⁹ and strategic inter-ethnic marital alliances.¹⁰ 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. Where class differences have been constructed and phrased in the language of ethnicity, adherence to a common local religious orthodoxy counters distance constructed in the socio-economic realm. Difference between groups is primarily socio-economic and undue attention to this through functionalist and historical materialist analyses fails to consider how what is central to the religious and cultural life of the *Gē usu'* is in fact shared across differences of ethnicity and class.

In this paper I argue that the source of continued *Gē usu'* prestige is not as much based on rigorous social and economic strategies designed to keep distance between groups, as it is made possible through inclusive processes and accommodating strategies in which difference is absorbed in religious structures and symbolic terms. As a minority population, a 'Semitic island in a Cushitic Sea',¹¹ historic rulers of a strategic site at various times overtaken by the Egyptians, the British, the Amhara, the Italians and the Somali,¹² the *Gē usu'* have been involved in ongoing processes of negotiating relations with outsiders and mediating varied cultural influences. Local religious orthodoxy, which is the subject of discussion in this paper, is flexible, absorbent and heterogeneous and provides a framework through which the threat of difference and annihilation of the group is transformed and often overturned; foreign elements are adopted into local structures and the definition of the *Gē usu'* as a category is thereby strengthened.

The Erosion of Autonomy and the Maintenance of Prestige

The *Gē usu'* are now a numeric minority whose basis of political and economic power has been gradually undermined throughout this century. Political control over the city and its environs was seized from their rulers at the Battle of Chelenko in 1887. Menelik's troops captured the pivotal trading centre in an effort to expand and consolidate the Christian empire which was shortly to become the Ethiopia over which Menelik and his descendants through to Haile Sellasie held imperial rule until 1974. With the city's capture, the independent Amirate of Harar which had existed for centuries was finally abolished.

Much of the land ownership upon which *Gē usu'* wealth has historically been based has been undermined through the land reform policies of the socialist dictatorship which came to power in 1974. Most agricultural land was collectivized leaving a minimal amount which could be independently owned by farmers who actually worked the land, thereby undermining the feudal basis which had kept Oromo in a position of relative serfdom vis-à-vis their *Gē usu'* landlords. Urban

land and property was appropriated by the state and residents were divided into *Kebeles*, or Urban Dwellers' Associations with collective responsibilities for tax collection and maintenance. Until the last century farming had been the most honourable of occupations for *Gē usu'* men, but most in this century became merchants dealing in the new trade of cheap, imported goods from Eastern markets which came via nearby Dire Dawa. In 1902, with the building of the railway station on the Addis-Ababa—Djibouti line, much trade was deflected away from Harar toward this new market town and Harar was thereafter relegated to a position of diminished importance.¹³

Despite the undermining of their political autonomy and economic monopoly over the last century, the *Gē usu'* have nevertheless remained a prestige category to which members of other groups aspire. Through a recognized process of enculturation known as *Gē lāmād*, 'learning the way of life of the city', or rather its people, Oromo, Somali, Arab and even Amhara can effectively become *Gē usu'* through living within the city walls, speaking the language of *Gē sinān*, conforming to the precepts of local culture known as *Gē āda*, and participating in the fundamental forms of social organization in which overlapping membership forms a complex matrix of interdependency. In reality however, non-purity is vigorously denied and acceptance within the community demands such rigid conformity and homogeneity that, as Waldron has suggested, even obvious differences in wealth are difficult to discern.¹⁴

Gē usu' perhaps remains a prestige category precisely because of this combination of a pretence to ethnic purity and processes which blatantly contradict it. This grants the possibility for social mobility and status enhancement to members of other groups. If we view tensions in Harar as based on class rather than ethnicity, we can see the possibilities for realizing class aspirations through ethnic conversions.

The threat of being overtaken is minimized through means which allow for integration and the negotiation of difference. This is explicitly recognized within the realm of local religious orthodoxy where as I discuss here: 1) saints, who are seen as forefathers of the city's inhabitants, reflect the heterodoxy of the city's population; 2) shrines, which are the primary sites of religious expression in Harar, serve as sites of inter-ethnic worship; and 3) class may be exclusive but religious hierarchy is not structured according to the same principles; religious authority is not restricted to *Gē usu'*, and religious education is not and has never been exclusive.

Saints as ancestors

Within and just beyond the circumference of the city wall reside more than 60,000 people and, according to local religious scholars,¹⁵ 356 *awliyā'*, 'friends' (of God) or, as the word is commonly translated, 'saints'. In the Qur'ān, the term *walī* is variously used to denote a 'friend', 'patron', 'benefactor', and 'protector', of God¹⁶ and in some cases, to describe God himself in relationship to humans.¹⁷ In Harar, *awliyā'* are understood in the first sense—as trusted friends and allies of God engaged with him in relations of mutual obligation and support.

The worship of saints is generally found throughout the Muslim world at the heart of the ascetic or mystical practices of Islam. 356 is an auspicious number, referred to within Sufism as the fixed number of *awliyā'* who inhabit the earth at any given time.¹⁸ In Harar however, the saints are not part of an established Sufi tradition. They are not recognized as leaders of brotherhoods or spiritual paths, or pursued for purposes of spiritual enlightenment and ascendance, nor do they demand of their followers asceticism and the renunciation of worldly materialism. Rather, they are the focus of a widespread and popular reverence or 'cult of saint worship',¹⁹ where attendance at shrines is inclusive across lines of gender, class and ethnicity and central to the daily lives of the majority of the inhabitants of the city.

As Edward Reeves states, there are analytic difficulties in viewing this phenomenon as a 'cult of Muslim saints'.²⁰ Some have questioned the appropriateness of the term 'saints' in a Muslim context when neither do their social roles correspond to those of saints within Christian tradition,²¹ nor is there a canonization process through which saints are officially recognized.²² Muslim saints are most often recognized as such through popular opinion during the lifetime of an individual rather than granted status through formal procedure after death. While the cautionary note is worthwhile, Reeves suggests that this has resulted in a tendency to overstate the differences between Muslim and Christian saints and thus, he (and I) follow the tradition of established theorists²³ who translate *walī* (pl. *awliyā'*) as 'saint(s)'.²⁴

Others have tended to include saints' cults within the realm of Sufism.²⁵ Denny states that while 'Sufism and saintliness are closely related historically, conceptually and temperamentally' they are not coterminous.²⁶ Reeves chooses to keep the saint cult as analytically distinct, despite its historic relationship to Sufism,²⁷ because it involves a much broader section of the population than does the Sufi order.²⁸ In Harar, the only recognized Sufi group is a relatively obscure group of

men referred to as the Solfi Qur'āners. The membership and activities of the group are not known to the majority of the population, and other individuals who profess to be Sufi ascetics are often dismissed by the population at large as poor or crazy individuals who mask their inadequacies in the guise of religion. Sufism is thus not widely established nor particularly revered in Harar, while devotion to and knowledge of the saints engenders considerable respect and saint worship affects the lives of the majority of the city's inhabitants, though in various ways and to varying degrees.²⁹

In the case of Harar, it is additionally important to maintain this distinction because the cult of saint worship does not employ the language of Sufism. The saints and their adherents are not identified as Sufis, nor are devotees organized into spiritual brotherhoods. Furthermore, Sufism is a broader tradition organized in terms of a specific hierarchy at the pinnacle of which saints are situated, while saint worship in Harar focuses specifically on saints themselves. In Sufism, the hiddenness of saints and intended meanings are emphasized. As Hoffman-Ladd states, 'The greatest saints, in particular, are hidden among God's servants and may be serving in very lowly and inconspicuous capacities in society'.³⁰ Saint worship, as practised in Harar however, tends to focus more on visible saints, those who have demonstrated significant action and to whom monuments are erected providing a concrete form through which their recognition and popularity is enhanced.

Hoffman-Ladd states that 'although the Sufi definition of sainthood may depend mainly on inner, and deeply personal attributes... the average person knows a saint by his or her ability to work miracles, disperse blessing and function in an intercessory capacity for those in need'.³¹ It is not the 'vague ideas of other-worldly holiness' which inform belief about saints states Gilsean, 'but the capacity for significant action in the world'.³² The intrinsic worth of the saint is derived through the spiritual power, or *baraka* with which God has blessed him or her. As God's intermediaries, the saints serve to communicate his power through the performances of miracles, or *karāmāt*, legendary accounts of which affirm the miraculous powers of saints and their tangible actions on earth.

Indeed, it is possible in many cases to locate the saints of Harar in terms of their importance in the religio-political history of the city. A great many were Amīrs, leaders of historic Jihāds, infamous religious scholars, imāms, sheikhs, and/or descendants of the Prophet. Being or becoming a *walī*, however, is a reflection of God's will, rather than the result of active design or pursuit,³³ thus a learned, influential man in

Harar has no greater claim to sainthood than does an illiterate peasant. Collectively the saints are known as *awliyā' ambiach*—‘all the saints’ (of Harar) and are viewed as protectors of the city and its inhabitants. Their shrines are referred to as *āwach*, a term which also means fathers in the language of *Gē sinān*, suggesting the importance of saints as founding fathers and ancestors of the inhabitants of the city. As the *Gē usu'* are the descendants of friends of God, they see their city and community protected by the *baraka*, or the power of blessing, transmitted by God through their saints, protection which can only be sustained by constant and community-wide invocation through ritual, prayer and *ziyāra*, or visits to the shrine where devotees come bearing offerings of incense, certain foods and *chāt*, the leaf chewed as a stimulant throughout the region.³⁴

While this amount of knowledge might be widely shared, individual knowledge about saints and their shrines is, of course, much more specific—variable on the basis of such factors as gender, ethnicity, descent, area of residence, and personal needs and preference which affect which shrines people visit, and when. Among those saints who serve as community wide references however, both men and women and different ethnicities are represented. In studying an endogamous community who refer to the saints' shrines as ‘fathers’, I was struck that ‘fathers’ in this sense should appear to include mothers and non-*Gē usu'*. Exploring this relationship provides interesting insights into the construction of religion, history, identity, ethnicity and gender³⁵ in Harar.

While conducting anthropological fieldwork in Harar during 1994 and 1995 I recorded the names of 272 saints and located shrines for more than two-thirds of these. Shrines vary widely in appearance, from unmarked sites to small niches carved into walls of houses, compounds, or mosques, to rocks and trees, to graves, to elaborate domed tombs more reminiscent of the marabouts scattered throughout the Maghrib.

While saints and their shrines are not divided into an explicit hierarchy in terms of their relative importance in Harar, knowledge of certain saints is more widespread throughout the community for reasons such as the popularity of legends surrounding their role in the religious-political history of the city, the centrality of their shrines in particular religious festivals and life cycle rituals, and the physical location or conspicuous structure of their shrines.

Some saints do not have any symbolic form by which recollection of them can be triggered and it is probably fair to generalize that the name of an enshrined saint is more readily recalled than the name of a saint whose presence is not concretized. In many cases a saint is

associated with a sacred place without symbolic representation where he or she is known to have performed a miracle. If the site fades from collective memory, there is no physical reminder to suggest the sacredness of the place. In some cases a saint has no physical association because he or she preferred to remain hidden. The concept of a hidden *walī*, a saint concealed from others and even, in cases, from themselves, is common in areas of the Muslim world where saints are honoured.³⁶

During the course of fieldwork I became associated with several of those shrines most widely known throughout the community: Āw Abadir who is the founding saint of Harar, said to have come from Arabia in the 9th century; Amīr Nūr, a Somali who is reputed to have built the city wall in the 16th century; Āw Saiyid ‘Alī, who was one of the 43 sheikhs who accompanied Abadir on his journey; and Āi Abīda who is regarded as the mother of Harar; as well as a number of smaller shrines which were located in the neighbourhood in which I lived which were the collective responsibility of the neighbourhood’s residents. Most individuals in the city will have a similar set of relationships—knowledge about and periodic visits to both the major shrines and the shrines in the immediate vicinity of where they live, thereby sharing a set of global references and having a more specific and variable set of local references.

While the saints’ shrines are individually and collectively known by the *Gē usu*’ term *āwach*, or ‘fathers’ of the city, they do not all represent *Gē usu*’ saints. Of the saints I mention above, three are Arabs and one is Somali. In Harar there are Arab saints whose origins are variously traced to Arabia, Iraq, Yemen and Turkey as well as large numbers of Somali and Oromo saints.³⁷ Heterogeneous populations can thus see their ancestry reflected in the corpus of saints since all refer collectively to the shrines as *āwach*.³⁸

Major *āwach* have a *murīd*, an individual, often a direct descendent of the saint, who serves as the conduit between the saint and those who come to worship at a shrine. Through direct descent from the saint and/or by possessing knowledge of the life of the saint, including references to his or her character and appearance, accounts of miracles (*karāmāt*) performed, and appeals to the special powers the saint is known to possess, the *murīd* is in a privileged position vis-à-vis the saint, able to communicate directly and interpret the signs he or she transmits.

According to oral history conveyed to me by Sheikh ‘Abdul Sematt, the *murīd* of Āw Abadir, among the 44 founding saints, individuals were adopted by populations as their representatives. Once ‘chosen’ as the

representatives of *qabīla*, (nationality) these saints were adopted as part of these respective groups. Later saints are said to originate from all parts of the Muslim world. Although systematic comparison on this point has not been undertaken, some shrines in Harar are understood locally to have counterparts elsewhere in the Muslim world.³⁹ Later saints presumably also came from within the various groups and, accordingly, reflect the diversity of the population resident in and around Harar. It is claimed by many *Gē usu'* that with only one exception (Sheikh Hashīm 'Abdul Azīz, who was born in the city),⁴⁰ none of the saints originate from Harar, although once here, many are adopted as *Gē usu'* or Oromo.

While some saints are known by their *qabīla*, or nationality, the nationalities of most saints are largely considered irrelevant. Despite their ethnic diversity, the saints are known amongst *Gē usu'* as their ancestral fathers. In an informal survey I conducted, it became readily apparent that there was little consensus on the perceived nationalities of most saints. 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' *Gē usu'* which literally means 'people of the city', mirroring processes of enculturation (*Gē lāmād*) on the ground whereby non-*Gē usu'* aspire to and assimilate into the prestige category *Gē usu'*, despite the projection of the category as closed, exclusive, and strictly endogamous. Saints, forefathers and community leaders are thus heterodox in origin, reflecting the reality of centuries of inter-ethnic interaction and the multi-ethnic sources invested in this category of *Gē usu'* which are denied on the ground but blatantly manifest and easily reconciled within the religious realm.

Sufism may be approached as a form of worship fluid and flexible enough to be able to successfully adopt and incorporate spiritual elements which exist outside its structure. It has been suggested to me that the fact that many of the shrines are natural features such as rocks and trees might suggest that at least some of the shrines might be pre-Islamic in origin.⁴¹ The coming of Islam to the Harar plateau somewhere between the 9th and 11th centuries might have allowed for a synthesis of an existing ancestor cult with a new system, which is believed to have been carried by Āw Abadir, the founding saint of Harar, from Arabia.

Saints and the quality of divine blessing they hold, known throughout the Muslim world as *baraka*, tend to be referred to as pre-Islamic elements incorporated into local Sufi doctrines.⁴² Gibb and Kramers

state definitively that 'the worship of saints is not Kur'anic' and is even 'contrary to its spirit'. They note the diverse origins of saints throughout the world, among which some saints 'are transformations or survivals of ancient cults, heroes of old days, gods of woods and springs . . .'.⁴³

Addressing this issue in *Harar*, the historian Ulrich Braukämper states that:

Psychologically, the veneration of saints fits into the patterns of pre-Muslim beliefs and practices . . . the deeply rooted ancestor cult can smoothly be substituted by a type of veneration which is acceptable to Islam . . . many sanctuaries of the old religion have thus been transformed into Muslim ones.⁴⁴

As I approach local orthodoxy as a lived experience for the *Gē usu'* its aspects are no less legitimate if they originated outside or alongside more universal traditions. Indeed as Ladislav Holy notes, it is common that elements of local practice which might be seen to deviate from established orthodoxy are viewed as magical or animistic in nature, and have been interpreted as pre-Islamic elements which have survived and been incorporated into the existing Islamic system. The spread of Islam has not only carried the Qur'ān and Hadīths, but also a myriad of associated traditions which may then be considered as simply part of the language of Islam, post-Islamic or even pan-Islamic.⁴⁵ As such, I situate the *Gē usu'* experience of their saints in terms of the Islamic framework within which they are believed to have always existed.

As these ancestors hold a privileged position in relation to God, they are honoured and their actions celebrated. The exemplary and enviable characters of the saints depicted within legendary accounts suggest the morality and worthiness of the ancestors of the group, and provide standards to be emulated by successive generations. These legends, shared throughout the community, carried from individual to individual and transmitted across generations, promote the internalization of ideals the ancestral saints are believed to represent. The widespread awareness of such ideals produces standards for the community, fostering conformity through a sense of shared history and moral expectation and consensus in religious terms.

*Shrines as Interactive and Inclusive Spaces*⁴⁶

Much analysis of saint worship has tended to focus on shrines themselves and has largely theorized that they serve as alternate sites for the otherwise marginalized and dispossessed—generally, women and poor men.⁴⁷ Edward Reeves has noted that this type of equation has similarly led researchers to assume that in urban locales, 'urban sophisticates

have little use for Muslim saints, for whom this little tradition is tainted by its rustic, thaumaturgical origins'.⁴⁶ In the complex, heterogeneous urban setting of Harar, shrines both attract and reflect the diversity of the city's population.

This perspective has resulted from an analytical persistence similar to that in studies of the Middle East where influential scholars have theorized a typological, two-tiered existence in which a Great Tradition of formal or orthodox Islam centred 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.⁴⁹

As Tapper and Tapper have suggested, in this dualistic reckoning 'Great is to Little as literate elite is to illiterate masses, urban is to rural, intellectual is to emotional, public to private, male to female, and so on'.⁵⁰ As an analytic tool, this dichotomous schema perpetuates the notion of a relatively passive, dependent and necessarily aberrant realm of Muslim beliefs and practices which are outside orthodoxy, dominated and perpetuated by those marginalized within the dominant system. Popular traditions, in this type of analysis, are seen to occupy a less rigidly circumscribed interior; a private place in a world apparently dominated by the authoritative structure of orthodox, public institutions.

This view is often promoted internally as well. The pervasiveness of the shrine as a key social and religious arena in Harar, and of the saints as potent sources of protective power, can be contrasted with the Wāhhabī condemnation of the worship of saints as akin to the worship of false idols and Gods in the time of the *Jāhiliyya*, the time of ignorance before the revelation of the Qur'ān. For the Wāhhabīs, the Sufi quest is fundamentally heretical in that its ideal is union with a God who, in their view, affords no such proximity. Wāhhabī interpretation of the Qur'ān insists that no one can intercede between God and humans, but as Denny points out, 'the cult of Islam features intercession on a grand scale'.⁵¹ Hoffman-Ladd states that many educated Egyptians see such practices as superstitions enacted by the poorer and illiterate classes. 'But this impression is certainly false', she writes, since the crowds are diverse and 'there are also many middle and upper class devotees'.⁵² Reeves' study of saint worship in Tanta similarly finds that 'privileged as well as nonprivileged individuals use the cult for ideological discourse and dramaturgy'.⁵³

In Harar, local Islamic orthodoxy demands fulfilment of complementary obligations toward both the mosque and the shrine. Local orthodoxy is, as Ladislav Holy has suggested, the meaning and practice

of Islam in a given context, where the extent to which it might be seen to deviate from any more broadly defined orthodoxy is irrelevant to the lives of those who practise it.⁵⁴ At the local level is a system which has its own regulations, obligations, occasions of significance and range of beliefs and believers which constitutes a learned and internalized system of orthodoxy. The system is obviously not uniformly and homogeneously internalized and experienced across society and differs according to the temporal, spatial and social context in which it is applied. 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 experienced. It would therefore be totally inappropriate to suggest a division which demarcates shrines as opposed or outside, when local Islamic orthodoxy demands both sites be visited, and both forms of prayer be enacted—each accorded spiritual merit in local terms. Hoffman-Ladd has suggested that shrines may in fact be seen as more sacred than mosques since 'the mosque merely directs prayer toward the spiritual centre, (while) the shrine contains its own spiritual centre and the saint, a direct link to heaven'.⁵⁵

That the *āwach* are neither private, subsumed or secondary to the mosques is evidenced by the fact that major religious celebrations such as 'Āshūrā', 'Arafa and *Nabī Mawlūd*⁵⁶ (the Prophet's birthday) are all celebrated at shrines rather than mosques. Many other situations as well illustrate complex interdependency between mosques and shrines. In some cases, for example, the imām of a mosque is also a *murīd*, most often where a shrine is located in a mosque or within its compound. Local interpretations of the Qur'ān and Hadīths are enacted at the shrines where they are interwoven with *karāmāt* stories, or accounts of miracles performed by legendary saints. Children at Qur'ānic schools are required to make an annual ritualized visit to the shrine of Āw Abadir; the continuity of their orthodox education, their school, its students and the learning process ensured by honouring the patron saint of the city.

Observing *ziyāra* to the shrines is essential to maintaining the welfare of the city and its inhabitants, particularly during the 'dangerous' month of *Safar* when observances must take place at all shrines. Scheduled weekly and monthly days for visits are less motivated by specific individual needs than by a more generalized concern with maintaining a mutual and ongoing supportive relationship between residents of the city and their saints. Fatima Mernissi and others have stated that people come to shrines motivated by the search for solutions to specific

problems.⁵⁷ But as in Reeves' study in Tanta, the majority of those who bring offerings to shrines on a weekly basis in Harar are not doing so in order to fulfil a pledge to a saint who has bestowed a blessing or brought an answer to some prayer,⁵⁸ but are rather expressing piety and appreciation to their saintly forefathers and mothers.

While the mosque and the prayer it demands are essential to identity as Muslims, visits to the shrines are essential as Muslims of Harar⁵⁹—and as essential whether you are male or female, wealthy or poor, *Gē usu'*, Oromo or Somali. The shrines appear to be able to absorb and accommodate differences based on gender, wealth, status and ethnicity (to the extent that a Christian Amhara⁶⁰ or even an uncircumcised agnostic, female anthropologist can be welcomed and blessed) as well as political difference. I suggest this is not only because the heterogeneous origins of the saints reflect the diversity of population in Harar but also because shrines are situated in neighbourhoods, where collective responsibility must be taken by ethnically diverse residents. Goldziher suggests that saint veneration offers for people a means of connection to religion over the vast divide which separates humans from God.⁶¹ In Harar that connection is highly localized through the recognition and worship of God's intercessors within the neighbourhoods in which people live. As Denny states, the presence of a saint sacralizes a place, giving it a power and prestige accessible to those who come into contact with it.⁶²

All shrines are situated in neighbourhoods since the whole city is divided into fairly clearly demarcated units of a limited number of households. I cannot say this definitively, but of the 100 or so neighbourhoods in Harar which I have identified, I suspect that at least one shrine is found within each. Close to half of all neighbourhoods are named after saints whose shrines are found within their borders. Residents of neighbourhoods share essential resources and take collective responsibility for maintaining shared space. It is thus as essential that shrines in neighbourhoods are shared and attended to collectively as it is that streets are swept and water is shared. Before political circumstances led to the outmigration of a large number of *Gē usu'* in the 1980s,⁶³ neighbourhoods appear to have been much more ethnically homogeneous.⁶⁴ With Oromo, Somali and Amhara moving in to occupy those spaces previously monopolized by *Gē usu'*, most neighbourhoods are today quite mixed and collective responsibilities are now shared by ethnically diverse residents.

Hoffman-Ladd writes that, in Egypt too, people refer to neighbourhoods in terms of the saint who is enshrined there. 'The presence of

the saint in their neighbourhood is believed to offer the neighbourhood special blessing and protection. Baraka radiates from the shrine in ever decreasing concentration'.⁶⁵

Degrees of Protection

And so might it be said that *baraka* radiates from the city in ever decreasing concentration. There is a dense concentration of shrines within the city wall, most of which are associated with particular neighbourhoods. Beyond this a number of shrines are scattered throughout the farmlands, the furthest at a distance of 10-15 kms. A ring of saints settled around the city protects people and place from some of the potential dangers lurking in the open spaces beyond.

As a symbolic boundary the wall enshrines the traditional homeland of the *Gē usu*'. Its construction, however, postdates the arrival of the founding fathers, or 44 saints led by Abadir, who in earliest estimates are said to have arrived in the 9th century.⁶⁶ Āw Abadir's *murīd*, Sheikh 'Abdul Sematt, says that it was in Abadir's time that the locations of shrines to honour each of the 44 founding saints were decided. The distribution of these *āwach* was determined as the most strategic layout for purposes of protecting the city and its inhabitants. Abadir was the only one of the 44 to settle in the area of the city which would centuries later be bound by the city wall. The other 43 settled outside the area of the city in a protective circle.

It has been suggested to me that within the complex interior of the city the intricate matrix of narrow lanes has a deliberate pattern which relates to the location of saints' shrines.⁶⁷ The following verse from a Harari *zikri* (equivalent to the Arabic *dhikr*, religious praises with a fixed form and structure), sung by the regular devotees at the shrine of Āw Abadir has, in response to my queries about its meaning, been interpreted by religious scholars to suggest order within the apparent randomness and irregularity of the city streets.

<i>Hamisti bāri-zala</i>	Owner of the five gates
<i>Sātti shirti-zala</i>	Owner of the seven circles
<i>Āw Baharow</i>	Father of the sea (or, who came from across the sea)
<i>Ya Sheikh Abadir</i>	Abadir the man of religion

Devotees at Abadir suggested that the verse can be explained by looking at the layout of the lanes of the city. *Gē* is basically oval in shape and the lanes of the city can be shown to travel in roughly concentric circles. Abadir's *murīd* and devotees suggest that the city is divided

into seven circles⁶⁸—six within the city, with the wall forming the boundary of a seventh (see Map 2). They suggest that the circles formed by the narrow lanes of the city serve as boundaries between areas governed by different saints. Within each area between circles there is said to be one *walī* who governs the other *awliyā'* in the same area, and represents the *awliyā'* of that area at a weekly meeting of the seven saints who take responsibility for the welfare of the city.

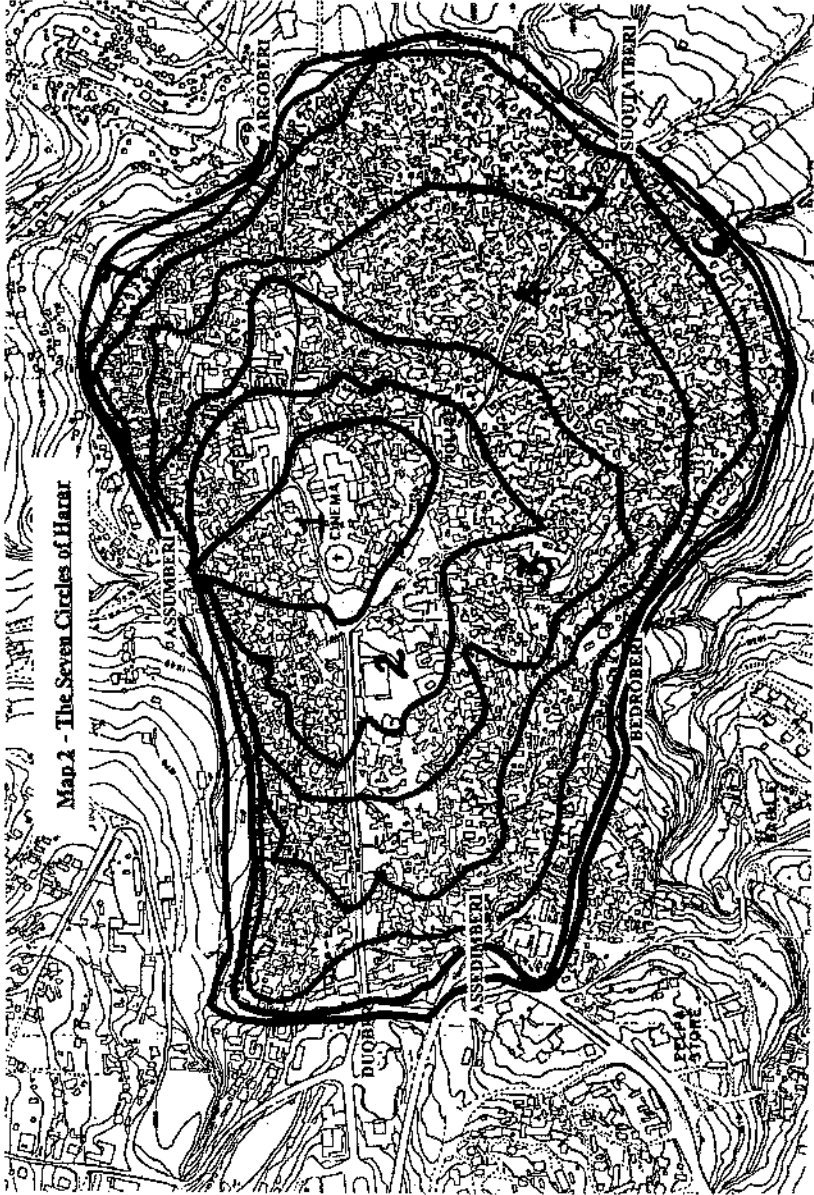
At its most vulnerable points, the gates of the city, particular saints reside,⁶⁹ and over each day of the year particular saints preside, thereby ensuring protection across both time and space. The city is ultimately watched over by the saints on Mt. Hakim, the mountain which rises from its southeastern edge where the saints congregate to discuss the welfare of the citizens under their care.

Conclusion

In Harar, local Islamic orthodoxy, which revolves around a corpus of saints enshrined within and just beyond the city walls, offers a framework through which heterogeneous influences can be absorbed and made meaningful in such a way that the purity and endogamy of the people who identify themselves as the city's original inhabitants—the *Gē usu'*—is apparently sustained.

The conceptual boundaries which exist around saints' shrines, are not, as I argue here, restrictive or ethnically exclusive. While the saint and the shrine may serve as key points for the common identification of members of a single ethnic group, they are fluid and accommodating in ways which facilitate not only communication within groups, but across generations, and between groups. Where dialogue within opposed factions of the *Gē usu'* community has become stilted and antagonistic,⁷⁰ broader conversation and individual expression, without pressure to identify politically, is possible within the arena of the saints.

The saints can, on the one hand, be interpreted as the ancestors of the *Gē usu'*, reflecting a great and glorious past. There is though also ample evidence of the varied ethnic origins of saints and the importance of saints to members of different ethnic groups in Harar. While *Gē usu'* may celebrate the *Gē usu'* and Arab saints as their forefathers, they also recognize the importance of Oromo and Somali saints and include them conceptually in the realm of *āwach*, or fathers. Oromo and Somali recognize their own saints among the *āwach*, and also point to the Oromo and Somali origins of some of the most powerful leaders, *Gē usu'* Amīrs and saints in the history of Harar. This suggests



Map 2 - The Seven Circles of Harar

that at this fundamental spiritual level both a history of the *Gē usu'* as the indigenous inhabitants and rightful rulers of the city, and a history of the multi-ethnic origins of the group and history of the city are reflected, enshrined and celebrated.

Amongst *Gē usu'*, perception of their own purity is supported by their belief in their connections eastward. That their founding father should be an Arab is of supreme importance to the group's belief in their Arab origins, and not only that, but their exalted Arab origins. This principle can be used as a conceptual justification of the distance of *Gē usu'* from the history of a predominantly Christian-dominated Ethiopia and from other Muslims in Ethiopia who are later converts, rather than descendants of those from the Muslim heartland of Arabia. The illusion of an unadulterated genealogy of pure *Gē usu'* descended from Āw Abadir is perpetuated within legendary accounts to great effect, despite the difficulties in reconciling this with evidence of inter-ethnic relations on the ground.

It is at this self-reflecting level of historical thinking that the perception of the sanctity of Harar and its founding people is maximized. As *madīnat al-awliyā'* ('the city of saints'), Harar is favoured and fortified by a body of individuals known as friends of God. As a city founded by saints, Harar and its population descended from saints possess what local legends suggest is a spiritual connection which transcends time and persists despite massive upheaval. Historical accounts evoking themes of defeat are contrasted with legendary accounts of the ancestral saints, providing complementary views of the *Gē usu'* as members of a wider and historically fluctuating world within which their position has necessarily changed over time.

The empowerment that the group can derive from a common perception of their history and ancestry, governed by friends of God, does, at least to some extent, provide *Gē usu'* with the resource and focus to maintain themselves as an identifiable group. Enacting *ziyāra* ensures continuity through time. By providing a framework within which the relationships between individuals, the community and the saints are constructed, the inhabitants are linked to their ancestors who continue to live among them, guiding and protecting them. By actively invoking the *awliyā'*, the past is commemorated, interpreted and reinterpreted, the present actualized and negotiated, and the future secured.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Adrian Hastings and Elizabeth Sirriyeh for their helpful suggestions regarding the revision of this article. In developing many of the ideas reflected here I have benefitted enormously from discussions with my former D.Phil. supervisor at Oxford, Wendy James, the historian Mohammed Hassen, and members of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. The research upon which this fieldwork and its follow-up was based was made possible through a generous grant from the Harold Hyam Wingate Foundation, and supplementary grants from the Emslie Horniman Fund of the Royal Anthropological Institute, and the Lienhardt Fund at the University of Oxford.

2. Richard Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa: or, An Exploration of Harar* Vol. I, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1987{1856}, xxvi.

3. *Ibid.*, xxv, 2.

4. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 15-18.

5. In employing terms here, I follow the orthography used by Wolf Leslau in his *Etymological Dictionary of Harari*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963. *Gē sinān* is a Semitic language which contains a significant number of Arabic words in its lexicon. In many cases, Arabic words are given locally and culturally specific pronunciations and meanings, hence the departure in some instances here, from standard Arabic transliteration and interpretations. Where pronunciation of Arabic words is standard, I have used the most common form of transliteration.

6. Sidney Waldron identifies the family, the friendship group and the community observance association as the three fundamental forms of social organization among the *Gē usu*. See his *Social Organization and Social Control in the Walled City of Harar*, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1975, vii, ix, 111.

7. *Ibid.*, 108.

8. *Ibid.*, 6-7.

9. See among others Alfred Bardey, 'Notes sur le Harrar', *Bulletin de Géographie Historique et Descriptive* 1897, 130-80.

10. Mohammed Hassen, 'Menelik's Conquest of Harar, 1887, and its Effect on the Political Organization of the Surrounding Oromos up to 1900', in D. Donham and W. James (eds.), *Working Papers on Society and History in Imperial Ethiopia: The Southern Periphery from the 1880s to 1974*, Cambridge: African Studies Centre, 1980.

11. Wolf Leslau, *The Verb in Harari*, University of California Publications in Semitic Philology, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958, 1-2.

12. 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.

13. Waldron, vii, ix.

14. *Ibid.*, 109. Where Waldron observes this in the mid-1960s it is still largely true today. I did, however, observe subtle ways in which wealth is indicated through and among women. *Gē usu*' women for instance wear trousers known as *gannāfi* under their skirts which vary enormously in terms of the quality of fabric and the elaborateness of the embroidery and use this as a measure of relative wealth.

15. I am indebted to several local religious scholars and historians for the knowledge they shared with me. Among them; local historians Kabīr 'Abdul Muhaymin and Izīr 'Abdul Sittar; Sheikh 'Abdul Sematt, the *murīd* of Āw Abadir; Amina Wazīr, the *murīd* of Āi 'Abīda; Ikḥista Ardo, the *murīd* of Āw Saiyid 'Alī; and the *murīds* of Amīr Nūr, Āi Nasra and Daḥābo wa Camilla Gīsti and Moḥammed Jami Guleid who accompanied me on many of these visits.

16. As for example, in Qur'an 10:62.
17. *Ibid.*, 2:257; 4:45.
18. H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers (eds.), *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961, 629.
19. The term applied to this phenomenon by Father Emile Foucher in 'The Cult of Muslim Saints in Harar: Religious Dimension', in B. Zewde, R. Pankhurst and T. Beyene (eds.), *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* Vol. II, Addis Ababa: University of Addis Ababa Press, 1984.
20. Edward, B. Reeves, 'Power, Resistance and the Cult of Muslim Saints in a Northern Egyptian Town', *American Ethnologist* 22(2) 1995, 306.
21. Frederick M. Denny, "God's Friends:" The Sanctity of Persons in Islam', in Richard Kieckhefer and George G. Bond (eds.), *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, 70.
22. Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, 71.
23. See for instance Vincent Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973; and Michael Gilson, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973.
24. Reeves, 307.
25. See among others, Gilson; and F. de Jong, *Turuq and Turuq-Linked Institutions in Nineteenth Century Egypt: A Historical Study in Organizational Dimensions of Islamic Mysticism*, Leiden: Brill, 1978.
26. Denny, 73.
27. Marshall G. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* 3 Vols., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974; and J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, New York: Galaxy, 1973.
28. Reeves, 307.
29. As Elizabeth Sirriyeh pointed out to me, devotion to saints by non-Sufis is a widespread, though not ubiquitous phenomenon throughout the Muslim world.
30. Valerie Hoffman-Ladd, *Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt*, Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995, 90.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Gilson, 45.
33. Denny, 86.
34. *Chāt*, known more commonly in East Africa and Arabia as *qāt*, is often used in religious worship in Harar. As a stimulant it appears to aid concentration and help sustain the energy required for hours and hours of recitation.
35. The subject of my forthcoming paper 'Negotiating Social and Spiritual Worlds: The Gender of Sanctity in the Muslim City of Harar'.
36. Hoffman-Ladd, 90-1; Gibb and Kramers, 629.
37. Denny has noted something similar in the case of saint worship in Tanta. He notes the significance of the fact that 'in a country that is at once warmly hospitable to outsiders and fiercely devoted to its own kind two of its greatest saints should have come from outside'. He does not, however, treat this as I do as a means of integrating foreign influences, but rather as a simple reflection of the 'universalizing brotherhood of Islam' (p. 82).
38. 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 nationalities who do 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.
39. This is very obviously true for 'Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī, the head of the great Qādirīyya order, for whom hundreds of shrines must exist throughout the Muslim world. In Harar itself, there are two shrines in his honour.

40. This recognition, however, does not accord him elevated status.
41. Wendy James. Personal communication.
42. See for example, Lamin Sanneh, 'Saint and Virtue in African Islam: An Historical Approach', in John Stratton Hawley (ed.), *Saints and Virtues*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 127-143, for a discussion of this.
43. Gibb and Kramers, 629-30.
44. Ulrich Braukämper, *Notes on Islamicization and the Muslim Shrines of the Harar Plateau*, Hamburg, 1983.
45. Ladislav Holy, *Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society: The Berti of Sudan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 39-42.
46. Some of the material in this section is also included in my forthcoming paper, 'Negotiating Social and Spiritual Worlds: The Gender of Sanctity in Harar'.
47. This is particularly so in terms of studies of religion and gender. See for example, Fatima Mernissi, 'Women, Saints and Sanctuaries', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3(1) 1977, 101-112 on the marabouts of the Maghrib as sites for women's expression.
48. Reeves, 308.
49. Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
50. Nancy Tapper and Richard Tapper, 'The Birth of the Prophet: Ritual and Gender in Turkish Islam', *Man* (N.S.) 22, 1987, 70.
51. Denny, 70-1.
52. Hoffman-Ladd, 121.
53. Reeves, 306.
54. Holy.
55. Hoffman-Ladd, 104.
56. More commonly known elsewhere as Mawlid al-Nabi.
57. Mernissi, 107.
58. Reeves, 314.
59. Harar is not a pilgrimage centre—Muslims do not come from outside Harar to visit these shrines.
60. Denny also notes that in Egypt, Muslims and Christians often share in the festivities surrounding saints of both traditions (p. 83).
61. Ignaz Goldziher, 'The Veneration of Saints in Islam', in his *Muslim Studies*, Vol. 2, S.M. Stern (trans. and ed.), London: Allen and Unwin, 1971 (first published in German in 1890), 256-257.
62. Denny, 76.
63. Many *Gē usu*' were actively involved in pan-ethnic movements of resistance against the socialist dictatorship in place from 1974 to 1991. As much as half of the community fled the city during this time with nearly one third of those seeking political asylum abroad.
64. Sidney Waldron, the last ethnographer to have done substantial work in Harar, observed this ethnic exclusivity of neighbourhoods in the mid 1960s.
65. Hoffman-Ladd, 114.
66. Bardey.
67. This was initially brought to my attention by my friend and research assistant Mohammed Jami Guleid and was subsequently a subject of detailed discussion with various religious leaders in the community.
68. The number seven is an auspicious one in Islam, and in many other religious traditions. Schimmel notes several references to the number within both Sunni and mystical Islam, including the seven major prophets, the seven circumambulations of the Ka'ba, the seven meanings of the Qur'ān, the seven canonical forms of recitation, and the seven parts of a cycle of prayer, or *rak'a*. In Islamic numerology seven represents the 'ideal combination of the spiritual Three [sic] and the material Four [sic] and thus points to the perfect way through life'. Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994, 79.

69. It has been suggested by Emile Foucher that each gate has a patron saint responsible for its protection whose shrine is located within 300 metres of the respective gate (p. 77). Although he does not give us the names of these saints and I have never heard saints referred to as such in the field, if the idea has any validity it would then also be significant in terms of providing protection at the city's most vulnerable points.

70. Political tension within the *Gē usu*' community has surfaced in the new era where groups are being asked to identify themselves in ethnic terms—practice previously suppressed under the Imperial and socialist regimes. See my paper 'Constructing Past and Present in Harar', in Katsuyoshi Fukui, Eisei Kurimoto and Masayoshi Shigeta (eds.), *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective: Papers of the 13th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* Vol. II, Kyoto: Shokado Book Sellers, 1997.