

BEYOND AUTHENTICITY: DIVERSE IMAGES OF MUSLIM *AWLIYA* IN ETHIOPIA

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ABSTRACT Historians and anthropologists studying local customs of venerating *awliya* (Muslim holymen) are likely to encounter difficulties in collecting their life histories from sources contemporary and remote, consanguineous and unrelated. This article presents examples of my attempts to collect historical information on three *awliya* and discusses approaches that may be viable in accommodating diverse images of *awliya* without denying authenticity of some information in favor of others. The consideration of various oral and written life histories begins with Al-Faki Ahmad Umar (d.1953), a Tijani shaykh from Bornu, who is widely venerated among Muslim Oromos in western Ethiopia. Accounts of Hajj Bushra, a well-known Muslim reformer in 18th century Wollo who is widely venerated today in Wollo (northeast Ethiopia), are also explored, as are chronicles of Sitti Momina (d.1929), a highly venerated Muslim holywoman from Wollo well-known for her spiritual powers. Based on personal experiences in facing the challenges of collecting oral and written histories of *awliya*, this study suggests that researchers can approach historical information as 'local knowledge,' which uses a variety of media to express diverse experiences and beliefs in the cult of *awliya*.

Key Words: Ethiopia; *Wali* veneration; Muslim; Authenticity; Life history.

INTRODUCTION

Historians and anthropologists interested in Muslim local customs of venerating *awliya* (holymen, plural form of *wali*) are likely to encounter difficulties in obtaining either oral or written information on life histories of *awliya*. There are several reasons why people involved in the custom, descendants, admirers and followers of *awliya*, tend to hide or distort what information they have.

The present investigation found that descendants of *awliya*, despite their wish to inform historical 'facts,' often expressed their fear that they could pass on information that would allow Islamic reformists (locally called *Wahabiya*⁽¹⁾) to attack their venerated ancestor for exercising *bid'a* (deviatory local customs innovated after the establishment of Islam). And at the same time, the descendants claim they have access to the most authentic version of historical facts and sometimes deny the authenticity of versions presented by unrelated admirers of the *wali*, whom they believe have the tendency to overstate what they have heard and seen because of their devotion and confidence toward their venerated *wali*.

Contrastingly, there are followers of the venerated *wali* who are cautious about exaggerating or expressing their knowledge for fear of divine punishment, in case they failed to tell the truth. These followers, unrelated to the *wali*, are learned disciples to their mystical master, well-informed in religious matters, having ample

knowledge and experience of writing religious manuscripts. Some of these prominent followers believe they are responsible for leaving written manuscripts concerning the deeds and words of their venerated *wali*. These manuscripts, usually written in Arabic, are regarded as a way to express their devotion to their religious master, the most familiar model for them to the ideal man, Prophet Muhammad. Although some of these manuscripts become publicized, others are kept safely guarded from outsiders because they contain subjects believed to have magical potency.

The issue at stake here is whether the researcher should give priority to those versions presented by some people and deny other versions on the basis of lack of 'authenticity.' Do we have the right to deny value of some versions transmitted among admirers in favor of other versions presented by descendants? I argue here that if we treat 'local knowledge,' whether oral or written, as historical information, we may be able to incorporate both versions. Local knowledge, in this respect, should be treated as something that is created and recreated by the local people, and is a valuable resource in aiding our understanding of religious devotion.

Comparing experiences of collection of oral and written life histories, this article deals with differences in how informants react to the researcher's request for historical information. As comprehensive life histories of the *awliya* are only compiled in collaboration with the descendants, admirers and followers of the *wali*, it is important to consider possible resolution to the above-stated difficulties that one encounters in the process of the research.

Examples given in the article are my experiences of collecting historical information on three religious figures, Al-Faki Ahmad Umar, Hajj Bushra and Sitti Momina.⁽²⁾ These are charismatic figures venerated as *awliya*, with a wide range of followers in different parts of Ethiopia, whose mausoleums are pilgrimage centers and nodal points of the veneration cult. In the course of gathering data, I found that informants' reactions to my inquiries into the historical information varied according to a number of factors. These included their knowledge of the length of my own involvement in the respective cults related to the *awliya*, the connections through which I gained access to the informants, and relations the informants had with the *awliya*.

THE CASE OF AL-FAKI AHMAD UMAR (d.1953)

Al-Faki Ahmad Umar, a Tijani⁽³⁾ leader from Bornu,⁽⁴⁾ is widely venerated among the Muslim Oromo of western Ethiopia (Ishihara, 1997; 2007). The Tijani cult, its origin dating back to 1920s when Al-Faki came out as a prominent *wali* in western Wollega, has its centers in Ya'a, Jimma and western Wollega (western Ethiopia).

The main part of my research on Al-Faki was conducted in the early 1990s (i.e., 40 years after the death of Al-Faki), yet I still had the chance to interview informants who knew and met him contemporarily. Many of those informants who used to live close to him were initially perplexed when requested to talk about him and even when they began their narratives they were often overwhelmed

by their emotions to the point that they shed tears. Some recollected anecdotes related to Al-Faki, how he saved them from difficulties, how he helped the poor, and how the environment altered according to his wish. These episodes were carefully related not to give an impression that Al-Faki was a ‘miracle-maker,’ so-to-speak. Even if they believed he caused a certain extraordinary phenomenon, the cause-and-effect relationship was discreetly omitted. ‘Only God knows,’ they would say.

These contemporaries were sources of information, considered ‘authentic’ by the descendants, which contributed to the establishment of a number of versions of oral tradition. Thus, I collected several versions of anecdotes related to Al-Faki’s attempt to protect the local people from Italian hostilities, from exploitation by the Amhara, and anecdotes regarding his trip to Mecca, and so forth. These oral traditions were narrated at locally held weekly gatherings where followers alternated between chewing *čat* (*Catha edulis*) and giving supplication (*du’a*) in between. The historical authenticity of the accounts was not argued on such occasions; the audience would accept them with a unanimous recognition that Al-Faki was a *wali*, and therefore it was likely that the accounts did, in fact, happen. However, when I (as a researcher) participated as audience, my questions occasionally prompted discussions of the historical authenticity and people debated over the knowledge that was being presented as the historical ‘facts.’ It seems that the audience considered what should be ‘written down’ as history as something slightly different from what people ‘orally transmit’ as history because the former is destined to become an authorized reference, whereas the latter, with its dramatized tone, is expected to have an impressive effect upon the audience.

Descendants of Al-Faki, who now number over a hundred, did not offer more insight about the history of Al-Faki than the contemporaries, but descendants usually had connections with these contemporaries and other learned persons who possess written material and authentic sources of oral tradition, i.e. ‘authentic’ according to the descendants. Other than these ‘authentic’ sources, there are numerous followers/admirers of Al-Faki, who almost blindly venerate him as *wali*. These followers include younger generations who never had contact with him directly when he was alive, but still revere and love him because they believe him to be a *wali* based on their own personal experiences, being saved from troubles and pain by supplicating aid from him.

There are two Arabic manuscripts about the life of Al-Faki, one of them published in Cairo, and the other one unpublished. The published manuscript, *Jala’ al-Fikr* (1953), written by Shaykh Mahmud bin Sulayman (alias Sheekota Abba Maca of Dedo),⁽⁵⁾ a learned Muslim scholar from the royal clan (Diggo) of Jimma, is composed as a set of verses and the contents are comparatively abstracted. The unpublished, hand-written manuscript, *Bab al-Wusul* (1943), written by Hajj Ali bin Ahmad (alias Hajj Abba Ganda) is in the possession of one of his disciples⁽⁶⁾ and contains historical details of the life of Al-Faki, as well as his miraculous deeds and magical formula. Because of the detailed information in this manuscript, it took much patience and time for me to persuade the owner of the manuscript that I had no intention to use it for purposes other than academic interest in the life history of Al-Faki.

Manzumas and *qasidas* (religious verses)⁽⁷⁾ composed in admiration of Al-Faki, are chanted at *hadras* (religious gatherings) held both at local communities and at pilgrimage centers in Ya'a, Sedi, and Minko (Ishihara, 1996). Popular themes of verses include the composers' personal experiences of dependence and emotional attachment toward Al-Faki. Some of these are recorded on the spot by the participants for their own entertainment and some popular ones are sold at music shops. There are a number of well-known *manzuma* composers, mainly Oromo, whose *manzumas* are composed in a mixture of Oromo and Arabic languages, and their recordings are favored by the followers who choose to listen to the cassettes while they give their supplications at home as they chew *čat*.

These *manzumas* are valued because the contents are educational and instructive in the sense that they teach Islamic history (and/or scriptural interpretation) (Ishihara, 1996). The literary aspect is also a point of admiration among followers. When the combination of words and the use of metaphors emotionally impress the audience and stimulate their imagination, they express their admiration and sympathy by making clicking sounds with their tongues. However from the historiographical point of view, *manzumas* and *qasidas* hardly contain any information on 'historical facts' regarding the life of *awliya*.

THE CASE OF HAJJ BUSHRA (d. 1863)

Hajj Bushra of Gata, Wollo in northeast Ethiopia has a dual image: known on the one hand as a scholar with an "uncompromising position on a strict observance of Islamic law," and on the other hand, as a *wali* believed to have "efficacious power of intercession with God" (Hussein, 2001: 89). The main targets of Hajj Bushra's objections to unorthodox practices were to certain local customs such as the *zar* (spirit possession) ritual and *gobadan* (the ceremonial site where sacrifices were offered) (Hussein, 2001: 110).

In November 2006, I had the chance to visit Gata to meet the descendant of Hajj Bushra who is in charge of the mosque and guardian of the *qubba* (mausoleum) after I was introduced to him through a friend of his, a well-known Christian spirit medium stationed in Harar. At the meeting, the friend from Harar functioned as a medium; he informed the guardian of Gata of our arrival in advance by his cell phone and advised us how to approach the descendants. Thanks to his advice, although it was our first time to visit Gata, the descendants accepted us quite warmly, showed us videotape-recorded *Mawlid* (birthday of Prophet Muhammad) festivals celebrated at the site and generously let us take photographs of the Arabic manuscript of the life history of the Hajj written by one his descendants and handed us an Amharic version of his life history type-written on nine pages. These included extracted details of his birth in Ifat⁽⁸⁾ and education in Sudan, and names of places where he caused miraculous deeds. These anecdotes are probably summaries of transcripts, initially transmitted orally and written down after a screening process by the descendants.

In the text we find, for example, that after stating that Hajj Bushra stayed at Sudan and Mecca for 25 years, his life history is listed with a sequence of

miracles. Upon his departure back to Ethiopia, his religious master, Sayyid⁽⁹⁾ Muhammad Uthman gave him and his servants an ox for provision. One day they slaughtered the ox and consumed its meat. Then, he wrapped the bones with the cowhide and beat it with a club. This brought the ox back to life. Hajj Bushra repeated this practice 30 times, and when they reached Gata, they ate the ox for the last time and its bones are buried in front of his *qubba*.

This Amharic version of his life history produces an image of a learned man who is granted the spiritual power to make miracles. The fact that this life history is written in Amharic is remarkable because this represents an attempt among the younger generation⁽¹⁰⁾ of reframing in their own convincing ways the religious deeds of their forefather, the source of their prestige as heirs of a charismatic figure.

THE CASE OF SITTI MOMINA (d. 1929)

Sitti Momina, a highly venerated Muslim holy woman born to a Christian family in Sanqa (Wollo), is well-known for her spiritual powers. Faraqasa, situated in Arsi, southeastern Ethiopia, where her *qubba* (mausoleum) is found today, is regarded as a magical place in itself, and is a pilgrimage center for both Muslims and Christians. I visited Faraqasa four times, twice on St. Gabriel's festival in the end of October 2006 and 2007, and also twice on the Pagwme festival (see below) in 2007 and 2008. I approached the descendants of Sitti Momina with the assistance of a friend of mine whose father happened to be a close friend to the descendants.

The manner in which the followers and descendants treated her life history was quite different from the afore-mentioned *awliya* cults. The original version of her life history, *The Munaqib*, written in Amharic by a convert and ex-clergyman on *berhanna* (sheep skin), disappeared during the Derg era (1974–1991). The local administration under the Mengistu regime of that time exercised radical means against the cult of Sitti Momina and sacrilegged the sacred area at Faraqasa by allowing the local residence to rob the private property of the descendants. This act was part of an effort by the administration to prevent people from gathering for religious purposes considered 'anti-revolutionary' by the regime. The then representative of Faraqasa, who was himself a *wali*, Hajj Nur Ahmad (or Qennyazmach Taye) was arrested for groundless reasons and *The Munaqib* of Sitti Momina was robbed by a local officer and its whereabouts are still unknown. According to contemporaries, in Hajj Nur Ahmad's days, *The Munaqib* was recited at *hadra* gatherings and the contents were copied on paper by elders frequenting Faraqasa. After the collapse of the Derg regime, Hajj Siraj, one of the sons of Nur Ahmad, became guardian of the mausoleum and took on the responsibility in reconstructing the ritual and its paraphernalia, virtually suspended during the Derg regime. *The Munaqib* that is now recited at *hadra* gatherings is a recovered version of one of the transcriptions made during the former gatherings. Although *The Munaqib* is not the original version, it is safely kept in the northern corner of the *hadra* hall, where most of the ritual paraphernalia are stored. Thus the

sacredness attributed to *The Munaqib* owes not only to the use of the manuscript at *hadras* but also to the spiritual power the manuscript is believed to have in itself. Because of the belief in its mystical significance at *hadras*, my request to photocopy *The Munaqib* was politely turned down and I was only permitted to listen to *The Munaqib* and then given explanation on her miraculous deeds.

However, there are local conceptions of her life history and versions of her miraculous deeds, which are regarded as highly arguable from the descendants' point of view. For example, one of the oral versions of her life history describes her as a mistress of Ras Makonnen (cf. Morton, 1977), a situation that evoked jealousy of Yeshimmabet, his wife. According to this version, the historical fact that Yeshimmabet suffered nine consecutive miscarriages was due to the curse of Shibesh (the Christian name of Sitti Momina before her conversion to Islam) against Yeshimmabet, after the latter's failed attempt to kill Shibesh. Though the descendants of Sitti Momina did not deny the historical interactions with the imperial family, neither did they confirm the authenticity of this story.

Other inconsistencies were found in various examples of her life story. Her admirers in Arusi, for example, believed she was born somewhere in Arusi, and was a Muslim by birth (Gamachu, 2007). A descendant living in Sanqa (Wollo), however, ensured us that she was born in Sanqa, but added that she went to Jimma (southwest Ethiopia) and was converted to Islam there. Moreover, the majority of her descendants claim she was converted in Gubba Qoricha, in western Hararge. How these versions of history came about and on what grounds do pertinent parties (including the researcher) believe in the versions are topics that require further inquiry.

Besides such written material and oral traditions, *manzumas* are also capable media for transmitting historical facts about the life of the *wali*. However, as was the case with *manzumas* made among the followers of Al-Faki, *manzumas* composed by admirers in praise of Sitti Momina seem to function more as a vehicle for expressing the composers' own experiences than a medium to preserve historical facts about the life of the *wali*. These *manzumas* are chanted by unrelated admirers and pilgrims gathering at Faraqasa. Pilgrimage pertaining to the cult of Sitti Momina is conducted on four occasions a year, the 19th (the day dedicated to St. Gabriel) of Tikimt (2nd month), Tahsas (4th month), Gimbot (9th month) and the whole month of Pagwme (13th month).⁽¹¹⁾ On these occasions, admirers of Sitti Momina and people having trouble in their lives gather at local centers of the cult, among which the major center is located at Faraqasa.⁽¹²⁾ Pilgrimage to Faraqasa and attendance at *hadras* in particular, were reckoned to be means of resolving personal trouble.

Hadra gatherings at pilgrimage centers are conducted in the *hadra* halls. At these *hadra* gatherings, participants chant *dhikrs*⁽¹³⁾ as well as *manzumas* in praise of Sitti Momina (and Nur Ahmad). Specifically composed by Sitti Momina and her contemporaries when she was at Guna (in Arussi), these *dhikrs* are either in Amharic, Oromo or Arabic, and are chanted only at nocturnal *hadras* led by the core members of the cult of Sitti Momina. These core members consist of close followers living around the pilgrimage centers, or descendants and close relatives, mostly living in Addis Ababa and Nazareth, and some living abroad, who

customarily gather at Faraqasa to attend this *hadra*.

Despite variations in recollections of aspects of Sitti Momina's life among her descendants and followers/admirers from different areas, it has not caused frictions probably because there has rarely been an occasion whereby different sections sit together to discuss the authenticity of her life history. The descendants are well-aware of the existence of diverse versions, but seem to accept them as local ways of perceiving her *wali*-ness.

CONCLUSION

The image of the *awliya* may be controversial because of the diverse sections related to each cult. This diversity comes from the wide distribution where the cult is accepted, the distance between each locality contributing to the co-existence of diverse versions.

Another factor related to the making of this controversial image is the various media by which the image is created. It is important to realize that the cult of the *awliya* is sustained by the local people, and it is therefore created and recreated through such variety of media according to local needs. Manuscripts, either hand-written, typed or printed, tend to gain authority in the historiographical sense. The belief in the mystical power of manuscripts seems to depend not only on the contents of it, but also on how the manuscripts are used in rituals and medical treatment. In the case of Al-Faki Ahmad Umar, the *Bab al-Wusul* manuscript written by Hajj Ali Abba Ganda contained formulas of medicinal use, which gave the manuscript a mystical feature. In the case of Sitti Momina, *The Munaqib* is considered to retain spiritual powers, and was prohibited from being photocopied. On the other hand, *Jala' al-Fikr*; the printed version of the life history of Al-Faki Ahmad Umar and the Amharic type-written life history of Hajj Bushra was expressly written for public exposure and wider distribution.

Oral traditions, despite occasionally carrying important information, tend to be recited with additional facts and interpretation, thus need to be treated with care, with sufficient information on the background of the transmitter. This reminds us of a similar type of argument done regarding the *hadiths*, wherein each tradition related with the Prophet Muhammad is attached a list of people who took part in the transmission of the tradition and who these transmitters were is the point at stake.

Manzumas, mainly composed impromptu by followers/admirers, have a larger effect than manuscripts and oral traditions because they are easily available by the public since recorded *manzumas* are sold in cassette tapes at music shops close to the pilgrimage centers of the cult. The rhythmical element and literary feature are factors that not only entertain the followers of the cult but also facilitate people outside the circle of the cult to get to know the *wali*. These *manzumas* are attributed with artistic characteristics intended to impress the audience, expressing the composers' love and veneration towards the *wali*.

Through comparison of three *awliya*, I have attempted to show that the various media (text, prose and recordings of chanted verses) are used to express diverse

experiences and belief in the *wali* in their own specific ways. Researchers need to keep in mind the diverse ways these media are put to use. It is only when we acknowledge this aspect that we can approach the cult of *awliya* with a balanced view without denying authenticity of one in favor of another.

NOTES

- (1) Originally, Wahhabiya was a name given by the opponents to those following the teachings of Muhammad ‘Abdu al-Wahhab (1703–1792), a Hanbali reformist who criticized local customs including the cult of saints (*awliya*), interpreted as *bid’a* (innovation)’ (Margoliouth, 1993: 1086). In the Ethiopian context, the appellation, Wahhabiya, has become a general name referring to those people opposing the wide spread local custom of venerating *awliya* and Sufistic practices.
- (2) Al-Faki, Hajj, and Sitti are titles for Muslims regarded as religiously prominent. ‘Hajj’ is a title for men that accomplished the *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca. ‘Al-Faki’ is a title mainly used in Sudanese Arabic and western Ethiopia, and applied for learned men with juristic as well as mystical knowledge (McHugh, 1994: 17). ‘Sitti’ is a title used for women.
- (3) Tijaniya is a Sufi order founded in Northwest Africa by Ahmad al-Tijani, an 18th century mystic. It is widely accepted among Muslims in West Africa (Abun-Nasr, 1965).
- (4) Bornu is a region located in the northeastern part of the present Nigeria. Al-Faki Ahmad Umar was born there in 1891, just before the Islamic state of Bornu (1396–1893) was conquered by a Sudanese warlord.
- (5) Shaykh is an Arabic word used as general title for learned Muslim men. ‘Sheekota’ is the reverential form in Oromo language of ‘shaykh.’ The difference made between ‘Sheekota’ and ‘Shaykh’ is that the former is usually used either with the location where he is regarded influential (e.g. Sheekota Dedo, indicating the learned man is stationed in Dedo) or with his formal name (which is granted by the society when he gets married according to the Oromo custom, e.g. Sheekota Abba Maca), while the latter is used with his name given by his parents in his childhood (like Shaykh Mahmud).
- (6) The copy I obtained was not the original version written by Hajj Ali Abba Ganda himself (the whereabouts of which I do not know) but a transcribed version written by (the late) Hajj Ahmadzein of Addis Ababa. I am grateful for Hajj Ahmadzein for his generosity for granting me permission to photocopy the manuscript.
- (7) In western Ethiopia, Muslim Oromo followers/admirers of *awliya* compose verses in either in the Oromo language or Arabic, which are customarily referred to as *manzuma* (or *qasida*).
- (8) Ifat refers to historical region, in central Ethiopia where the sultanate of Ifat was formed. Ifat was known for its central role in spreading Islam to south and central Ethiopia until the 19th century (Ahmed Hassen Omer & Nosnitsin, 2007).
- (9) Sayyid is a title, similar to Shaykh (for men), applied to those who are revered as *awliya*.
- (10) By ‘younger generation,’ I do not suggest that the translator, whom I do not exactly know, was necessarily a youth. It must have been a person who had good command of both Arabic and Amharic, and who had a clear intention of displaying the life of Hajj Bushra as a *wali*. This latter point gave me the impression that the Amharic version of the life history of Hajj Bushra, was prepared after the collapse of the Derg regime (1974–1991), because it was only after it that religious activities in general were revitalized.
- (11) The Ethiopian calendar, which begins on September 11 of the Gregorian calendar,

- consists of 13th months, each month consisting of 30 days. Each day of a month is dedicated to a particular saint, martyr or angel.
- (12) In Ethiopia, there are a number of places, most of them located in southeastern Ethiopia, where pilgrimage is conducted pertaining to the cult of Sitti Momina. These pilgrimage centers are places where Sitti Momina (or Nur Ahmad) is believed to have set up residence during her (or his) lifetime.
- (13) *Dhikr* is an institutionalized verse generally in Arabic, expressing surrender to and piety for Allah and Prophet Muhammad. Each *tariqa* (Islamic mystic order) has its own set of *dhikrs*, instituted by its founder and succeeded by his disciples/followers.

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