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Review

HARALD ASPEN, *Amhara Traditions of Knowledge. Spirit Mediums and their Clients*

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Reviews

The text of the book appears to be somewhat provisional. I have noted some misprints. Some pages, especially towards the beginning, give the impression that they have been typed somewhat hastily. Titles should be standardised, since English like capitalising words in titles!

Ezra Gebremedhin

HARALD ASPEN, *Ambara Traditions of Knowledge. Spirit Mediums and their Clients* = Aethiopistische Forschungen Bd. 58. Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden 2001. xx, 270 pp. Euro 64,-. ISBN 3-447-04410-1.

Aspen comes to northeastern Šäwa (and not northern Šäwa as claimed by the author) with genuine openness. He lets himself be led by his impressions. He walks through the neighbourhoods of the Gännät community southwest of Däbrä Sina in Mafud *wäräda*, Yefat *awrajja*. He meets people, particularly clients and mediums; he gets them to talk to him in private households, public drinking parlors and markets. There he allows them to express their thoughts and speak their minds and records their information. The clients talk about their dialogues with spirits, their families, their hopes, their fears, their religious concerns. All this is then examined in the context of the actual everyday life of the *balä weqabé* and his clients. His study is a long awaited completion of a project that began in 1988. Although the author has published essays related to the book, the insights provided in those pieces are pale by comparison with the richness of this monograph. The result is an evocative book in which the secret lives of clients and spirit mediums are all vividly described in a revised version of a doctoral dissertation in social anthropology written for the Norwegian University of Trondheim in 1994. This is the context in which Aspen's work, as well as the following review, should be read.

The author offers excellent translations of both historic and recent Amhara possession cult accounts and presents a valuable ethnographic assessment of this possession cult complex by drawing upon already collected data as well as his own fieldwork. The silver lining to this work is the fact that it is at core an ethnographically sensitive handling of a complex interconnection between the practice of spirit mediums and their clients on the one hand, and their cultural constructions and discursive practices on the other. Much of it is about the practice of the *balä weqabé* and the clients and their dialogue with the spirits. However, the theoretical analysis, the literature review, the historical context of Ethiopia in general and northeastern Šäwa in particular allow the author to describe the interpenetration of the Christian tradition and 'folk' religion. The followers of both tradi-

tions learned a great deal from each other during those long centuries of intimate relations. In this connection, the study offers insights into the processes by which Orthodox Christianity clashed with the realities of cultic beliefs experienced through the activities of spirit mediums and their clients.

Written in an accessible and jargon-free style, the book is likely to engage a broad readership in the analysis of spirit possession for which Ethiopia in general and northeastern Šäwa in particular present a comparison. The study is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter looks at the theoretical and empirical world of the project. The next chapter reviews the existing literature on spirit possession. Chapters three and four provide a broad account of the historical events and processes that are of relevance to church history and the phenomenon of cultic identity. Chapters five, six and seven deal with the broad variety of evil and benevolent spirits and the internal structure of cults and their officers using different *balä weqabé* case studies. The first three chapters hang a bit too loosely and suffer from repetitions. Chapters four, five, six and seven are more focused and ethnographically richer. These last chapters are an enjoyable reading because they are enlivened by the insertion of small narratives and consultant commentaries that help concretize how possession and cult religion are part of the ordinary world. The analysis of the practice of the *balä weqabé* and client communication with the spirits is enriched by references to other scholarly contributions on these very issues. Furthermore, acknowledging the work of intellectual ancestors or colleagues has also helped situate Amhara practices in a broader Ethiopian and African context. All these chapters involve extensive engagement with cult terminology and its use in possession processes by addressing the specificities of diagnosis such as description, analysis and therapy. The last chapter is a summarizing conclusion instead of a synthesis of the study.

The various chapters contain little comment by the author who reserves most commentary for the footnotes, a choice that enables him to speak more directly. This mode of presentation does open, however, a series of questions, particularly about how much of the interview was left out and how much editorial work went into transcription and translation. Indeed the book, graced with extensive notes and a good list of cited references, is about Amhara traditional knowledge on possession cults, but the fissures of communal knowledge about spirit possession continue to undermine individual supernatural powers of both male and female *balä weqabé* so lovingly described. With great clarity, Aspen moves between profound theoretical anthropological insights and detailed historical accounts and thick ethnographic descriptions; his use of these descriptions, the lively case study stories that seem remarkably coherent considering their concealed content, the deep description of ancient syncretism and the Ethiopian vari-

ant of spirit possession that haunt this beautiful book makes this work easily accessible and pleasurable to read. His literature review brings together earlier work and helps increase its visibility. He emphasizes that there is no single truth to the claims made by anthropologists about spirit mediums and their practices and instead suggests that a possession cult is a type of language that can be investigated in its own right.

In this book, Aspen makes use of cultural imagery of a spirit cult in north-eastern Šäwa to “demonstrate how human creativity connects imagination and reality in the production of a reality which is individually imagined, but socially created” (xv). The spirit cult epistemologies and practices appeal to imagination and creativity in individual participants, leaders and observers, while the social and historical context in which it is played out determine the Amhara cultural forms that emerge from these processes. Whether he discusses possession and cure or dialogues with spirits, Aspen reminds readers that possession cannot be reduced to simple explanations or unidimensional truths. Rather, he focuses his analysis around possession as an expression of marginality and a form of empowerment. Illness and misfortune are very much the centre of healing sessions, but possession is also about jealousy and envy and marital malfunctionality. Just like the rich Amhara ethnographic reality it purports to describe, *Amhara Traditions of Knowledge: Spirit Mediums and their Clients* is both seductive and perplexing, vibrant and illuminating; yet, at times, it is also bewildering, thereby frustrating the reader’s attempts to gain a grasp of the texture of the Amhara world of ‘folk’ religion.

Aspen, like others before him, aims at capturing the experiential immediacy of possession cults, but he also wants to preserve the opacity and magicity of the *balä weqabé* practice. As such, his account consciously avoids making Amhara spirit possession too transparent to the reader’s analytical gaze. The recognition that the reality of spirit mediums and their activities cannot be known, represented or spoken of helps the reader understand that possession is ungraspable or irreducible; but this approach also limits the reader’s understanding of how possession relates to, and is integrated into, the practices, conventions, and rhythms of Amhara traditional life in this area of Šäwa. Despite Aspen’s implicit recognition of such important dimensions of the lives of the *balä weqabé* and their clients, he offers a lot on the economics of possession, the powerful physicality of fetishes and the ways mediums inhabit and shape their immediate world. Keenly aware that writing about a topic like this runs the risk of exoticization, Aspen attempts not only to historicize possession practices by showing how they vary across time and space but to also suggest that Amhara possession beliefs do, in general, conform with the general literature on possession in Ethiopia. In this respect, one of the book’s strengths is also one of its shortcomings. In

trying to show how possession beliefs in various regions share essential aspects of the phenomenon, Aspen nevertheless homogenizes what are surely much more complex, ambiguous, and internally contested sets of beliefs. Thus, he characterizes similarities in totalizing ways that are at odds with the subtlety of analyses in the rest of the book.

Finally, the transformational or accommodational approach employed by the author would be aided by a fuller use of the comparative accounts such as those he makes in his references ranging from Hamer, Shack and Knutsson to Lewis, Morton and Boddy, and theoretical interpretations such as those he undertakes in his references to Barth, Beattie *et al.*, and Bourguignon in chapters five, six and seven. The need for such comparative empirical research and theoretical interpretation is widely evident since most available studies are limited to only one culture. In this context, it is possible to read a good deal of the anthropology of non-scriptural religions through the ethnographies of the Horn of Africa. Messing, Young, Shack, Lewis and Hamer worked in north-east Africa, as did Knutsson, Morton, Reminick, Torrey and several of their students. These authors represent symbolic, interpretive, reflexive, and cognitive anthropology, as well as the anthropology of religion.

The interpretive framework for this study – based most explicitly on a body of theory on spirit beliefs and cosmology rich in variational possibilities – makes it appealing for scholarly reading in comparative religion. Because of this, Aspen's study stands to become an additional contribution to the rich ethnography that already exists on the Amhara of Ethiopia (Weissleder, Hoben, Levine, Molvaer, Ege, Helen Pankhurst) in general and to our knowledge on the anthropological literature of possession cults (Messing, Young, Reminick, Morton) in particular. Thus, although there is a flurry of published works by Ethiopianist anthropologists on spirit possession, Aspen's book is yet another one necessary. In sum, the seminal character of this volume makes it placeable on the shelves of scholars interested in Amhara ethnography and cult cosmology, and should stimulate renewed interest in an important and widespread cultural phenomenon among Ethiopianist anthropologist scholars and students of this region of sub-Saharan Africa.

Abbebe Kifleyesus

CHRISTINE CHAILLOT, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition: a brief introduction to its life and spirituality*. Paris: Inter-Orthodox Dialogue 2002. 356 pp. ISBN 83-85368-98-1.

Voici un nouveau compendium sur l'Église d'Éthiopie (et l'Église d'Érythrée qui n'en est pas dissociée). Il vient prendre place à côté de celui de Kirsten