

CLAIMS FOR AUTHORITY AT THE SHRINE OF SHAYKH ḤUSAYN, ETHIOPIA

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Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn's modest living and appearance do not reflect his position as the imām and highest authority at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn, one of the most important Muslim shrines in the Horn of Africa. When I first met him in his home in Mercato, one of Addis Ababa's large and busy neighbourhoods, he sought to signal a distinct elevated status and, by surrounding himself with official letters, pictures, and newspaper clippings as proofs of his position, he explicitly engaged in a discourse of claiming authority at the shrine.

Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn was reinstated as the imām in 2005 and is officially recognized as the shrine's main leader by Ethiopia's political authorities. However, his claim to the office remains highly contested. The current leadership and opposing groups at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn have effectively blocked him from exercising any real authority. His appointment has intensified a conflict over leadership positions which has lasted for decades, and which has divided the shrine's community in two. On the one side are the Imām family and its followers, and on the other side, the present leadership and their supporters.

As a Muslim shrine with centuries-long history, Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn would commonly be labeled a traditional institution with a traditional leadership, and as the antithesis of modernity. Islamic reformists, who have gained prominence in the last decades, would also portray the shrine as a representation of 'traditional Islam'. It would thus be easy to assume that participants in the struggle over leadership, claims for power, and processes of 'othering' would refer to tradition and to narratives of the past, drawing from Sufi concepts, from a local and 'indigenous' religious reality, from genealogy—all closely situated around the shrine. It might further be assumed that the shrine would be detached from the so-called modern, usually viewed as irreconcilable with the traditional, and which then would be irrelevant to the discourses taking place.

This paper investigates assumptions about what constitutes 'tradition' and 'modernity'. By focusing on the production of narratives used to

authorize claims and exploring the strategies of the two opposing groups at the shrine and the role of the Ethiopian state, it will point to a reality characterized by highly complex discourses through which different actors and constituencies are making references to something that cannot be neatly compartmentalized as either traditional or modern. Contesting the notion of the two concepts as spatially and temporally separate, I argue for a more dynamic approach which sees incongruent narratives and concepts existing simultaneously in constant flux. I also suggest that the traditional and the modern are more than notions to which actors relate passively. Rather, the two are constantly produced by the ways situated actors actively appropriate these notions in shaping and re-shaping their reality. Actors are, in highly creative and disparate ways, justifying their social actions, negotiating their claims and counter-claims—in turn demonstrating the elasticity of the traditional and the modern.

THE TRADITIONAL AND THE MODERN

Research over the last decades has produced a growing understanding of and more nuanced perspectives on the concepts of the traditional and the modern. From being perceived as binary opposites and as contradictorily distinct—spatially and temporally—the traditional and the modern are more commonly viewed as concomitant parts of social realities. Instead of being perceived through a linear teleological lens, in which the traditional is doomed to succumb to the modern, they are both construed as inherently present and intrinsically related to complex processes of continuity and change.¹

There is, however, little consensus on how to understand the traditional. Perspectives which saw the traditional as a bounded entity and as a label attached to certain (pre-modern) periods and societies have few adherents today. An alternative approach sees the traditional as symbolically constituted by an imagined past, as constructed and invented. This is in turn related to ideology, in which the traditional is deliberately created by those in power, or to serve a particular purpose.²

¹ For an overview of such changing perspectives, see Marilyn R. Waldman, 'Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples' in *History of Religions*, 25/4 (1986): 318–40.

² This was first argued by Joseph R. Gushfield, 'Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change', *American Journal of Sociology*, 72 (1967): 351–62, and later elaborated by Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions' in Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.),

Although I find myself sympathetic to this view, I would be cautious about pushing the constructivist idea too far. There is little doubt that actors, in making claims to and about a past, deliberately produce symbols, narratives, or practices that are defined as traditional, and which are made to have specific functions. The point is, however, that the traditional in this sense could never be constructed out of thin air, nor could any tradition be invented in an ‘anything-goes’ manner. Never stagnant, the traditional remains part of real and concrete time: present in the actors’ narratives, embodied in their individual and collective experiences, enacted in practice, and embedded in actual space.

Those viewing the traditional as ideology also argue that actors define a particular practice as explicitly traditional, and that they subsequently make an effort to either preserve or eradicate it. I would label such objectification of tradition as traditionalistic.³ Such objectification occurs particularly in instances when pluralism increases and when alternative ideas challenge conventional knowledge and broadly accepted practices. What the traditional-as-ideology view fails to acknowledge is that there are numerous cases where actors do not define what they believe or do as traditional. They do not have any conscious attitudes towards what may be characterized as the traditional (or the modern for that matter), but rather take these formations for granted as un-objectified parts of their social reality, or, following Pierre Bourdieu, as unconsciously integrated in their habitus.⁴

The traditional is in this context broadly viewed as containing references to a past, which could be ancient or more recent, and which obviously to some degree is imagined through memory. The traditional is, at the same time, inherently present and subject to constant alterations, hence being a representation of both continuity and discontinuity. Consequently, the traditional stands in the unique situation of enabling change as constant readjustments of former and existing symbols, and is not erased by the arrival of the modern. It is

The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–14. For a more clear-cut argument, see Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, ‘Tradition, Genuine or Spurious’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 97/385 (1984): 273–90.

³ This was first formulated by Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), and also later by Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

intrinsically contextual, and must be explored in relation to intersecting local concepts and to broader social processes.⁵

Just as theorization of the traditional has grown more complex, nuanced insights into the concept of the modern have moved our understanding away from viewing it in the singular, and from perceptions of the modern as universalistic in its telos. The process of modernization does not entail a simple linear movement from tradition to modernity, and it cannot be treated as an exclusive opposite to the traditional.⁶ Terms such as ‘multiple modernities’ and ‘alternative modernities’⁷ have furnished perspectives which recognize modernity’s heterogeneous character and constant mutations, and which facilitate views that see modernity as something more than an equivalent to Westernization.⁸ In relation to globalization and the spread of the modern across the globe, such concepts recognize the continued relevance of the traditional and enable us in a better way to investigate how modernity’s persistence in a number of post-colonial localities has produced a rich flora of incongruent processes.

In this case, I consider Donald Donham’s ‘vernacular modernism’ to be particularly relevant.⁹ Paying due attention to the local and the role of situated actors, Donham argues that the modern does not merely arrive in a given locality from the outside; it is just as much a product of the members’ active engagement in discourses made available, and of their innovative remaking of inherent traditions as juxtaposed and intersected

⁵ Ousman Murzik Kobo, *Unveiling Modernity in Twentieth-Century West African Islamic Reform* (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 313–18; Corinne A. Kratz, ‘“We’ve Always Done It Like This... Except for a Few Details”: “Tradition” and “Innovation” in Okiek Ceremonies’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35/1 (1993): 30–65.

⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3; ‘Introduction’ in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993); xii–xv; Akhil Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 46–8.

⁷ Shmuel Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’ in Eisenstadt (ed.), *Multiple Modernities* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2nd imp., 2005): 1–29.

⁸ Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ‘On Alternative Modernities’ in Gaonkar (ed.), *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001): 1–23.

⁹ Donald Donham, *Marxist Modern* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), xviii.

with the novel. Similar ideas are captured in John L. and Jean Comaroff's concept of 'multilogue' that seeks to rectify previous subject-object relationships between the Western and the non-Western worlds. This endeavour entails a perspective which recognizes the relative autonomy and agency of actors,¹⁰ and which points to how they, both within and beyond a particular locality, interact in paving the way for new cultural practices and different conceptualizations of reality.¹¹

This consequently means that the traditional and the modern are more than narratives, resources, or repertoires readily available in fixed forms. Instead, they are intrinsically linked to human agency; narratives of actively accumulated knowledge and experience, disparately interpreted, constantly reconfigured—consciously and unconsciously—and also discursively contested, often to justify social action or to delegitimize the 'others'. This makes the traditional and the modern inherently elastic and subject to constant negotiations. It further means that what qualifies as traditional or modern, is in the eyes of the beholder. The researcher's *epic* perspective often differs from the actors' *emic* views—actors who, among themselves, also hold disparate and conflicting understandings. Different understandings may also be reciprocally affected by each other, producing complex discourses, situations of dynamic change, and unexpected results.

DIRRE SHAYKH HUSAYN

The traditional in this case is related to the shrine of Shaykh H̄usayn (Dirre Shaykh H̄usayn); to narratives about the figure of Shaykh H̄usayn, the historical legacy of the shrine, and stories about the shrine's custodians. These all refer to a particular localized past, yet are, as we will see, timeless in the sense that the actors constantly recreate them in projects of ascertaining authority and delegitimizing competing claims for authority.

Dirre Shaykh H̄usayn is located in Gololcha district in the northern part of Bale, not far from the Wabe Shabelle river. Although the number of pilgrims to the shrine has decreased over the last decades, it is still one of the most important Muslim sanctuaries in the Horn of Africa. According to reports from the early 1970s, the shrine hosted more than 100,000 pilgrims during the main festival.¹² The bulk of the pilgrims

¹⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004 [Chicago edn., 2002]), 46.

¹¹ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity and Its Malcontents*, xii.

¹² Ulrich Braukämper, *Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia: Collected Essays* (Hamburg: Lit, 2002), 141. There are two main festivals at

come from the nearby Bale and Arsi areas, yet there are also pilgrims from other parts of Ethiopia. The guardians of the shrine take pride in the claim that the shrine draws adherents from Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti, and even from Europe and the US.

The shrine is the burial place of Shaykh Ḥusayn, dating back to the late twelfth century. Considered a scholar and an emissary sent by God especially to Bale, all local traditions refer to him as pivotal for the Islamization of the area. Considered a *walī* (pl. *awliyā'*), the same traditions argue that pilgrimage to his grave commenced immediately after his death, and that the practice has continued unbroken until today. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to interrogate this claim. Yet the arrival of the non-Muslim Oromo in the latter part of the sixteenth century, which caused a gradual decline of Islam in Bale, makes it plausible to think of the pilgrimage as a more recent phenomenon.

Most probably the pilgrimage started at the end of the eighteenth century, with the arrival of a certain Shaykh Muḥammad Tilma Tilmo. He revitalized the practice of pilgrimage and boosted the shrine's importance as a distinct Islamic site of worship among the Oromo. The origin of Shaykh Muḥammad Tilma Tilmo and his arrival at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn are shrouded in much uncertainty. Ulrich Braukämper has claimed that Shaykh Muḥammad, or Aw Muḥammad as he calls him, was of Somali origin, sent to Bale by Amīr 'Abd al-Shakūr of Harar.¹³ This notion is not supported by any of the oral traditions in Bale, which all argue that he originated from Bale—yet without identifying his clan.¹⁴ Local traditions confirm that he spent time in Harar, and that he came to Bale after Shaykh Ḥusayn, in a dream, called him to restore the shrine and to propagate Islam among the people. Arriving at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn, Shaykh Muḥammad started the reconstruction of the shrine, building the main dome and other cupola-shaped monuments attributed to 'Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī (the founder of the Qādiriyya order) and to Shaykh Ḥusayn's family members. He moreover constructed a mosque and the Harro Lukko—a pond containing holy water. Shaykh Muḥammad Tilma Tilmo's position was soon challenged

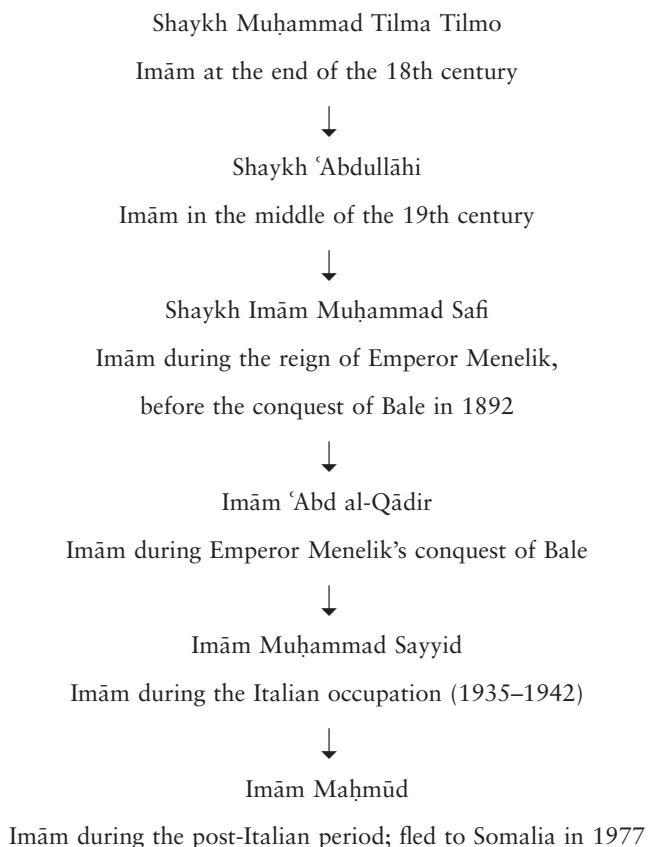
Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn. The first coincides with the *ḥajj* to Makka, in the month of Dhū l-Ḥijja, and the second occurs in the month of Jumāda al-Thānī—which was the time of Shaykh Ḥusayn's birth. In the Oromo language this is called *zaara galgala goobanaa* (the night the moon is full).

¹³ Ibid, 138.

¹⁴ Some traditions claim that he was of the Wawu clan in Arsi and that his mother was from the Sebro clan, in whose land he is also buried. See Umer Nure, 'The Pilgrimage to Dirre Sheikh Hussein: Its Social Organization and Overall Roles' (MA thesis in Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University, 2006), 23.

by Shaykh ‘Abbās, who arrived from Arsi at the same time. A leadership struggle erupted, from which Shaykh Muḥammad emerged victorious, and he was then appointed as the designated imām and the supreme authority of Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn. The two worked together, however, in calling the local people to embrace Islam and to take up the pilgrimage. The practice soon gained momentum, and for nearly two centuries it constituted the most significant collective ritual for the Oromo Muslims of Arsi and Bale.

The shrine’s leadership remained within the family of Shaykh Muḥammad Tilma Tilmo, referred to as the *warra imaama* (the family of the imām), which gradually paved the way for a differentiated religious leadership. The roles of ulema and qāḍīs went to Shaykh Muḥammad Tilma Tilmo’s younger sons, who passed these functions on to descendants of their respective lineages. The position as the imām was passed on to his oldest son, Shaykh ‘Abdullāhi, and followed his lineage:



Over time a village community attached to the shrine emerged. Referred to as the *darga*,¹⁵ it comprised the imām family, the descendants of Shaykh ʿAbbās, and what has been known as the *sakīna*. This latter group has no genealogical links to the shrine's two main families, but includes people who arrived at the shrine from the early twentieth century. Some came as religious students and teachers, others were pilgrims who remained at the shrine, and some were merchants, while others again were servants to the imām family. They were often viewed as possessing distinct spiritual power, but the *sakīna* never held any leadership positions at the shrine.

Stories about the shrine are deeply concerned with its physical presence and its particular historical legacy. Yet they also transcend time and space. Representing a history that opens up a mystical reality, in which the shrine as sacred space constitutes an interface dissolving any past or present, the narratives are also *real* and *timeless* in that they depict the *walī* as a perpetual being. They convey a divine message, have a purpose, and are thus authoritative. The traditional is thus, by the ways it is interpreted as having particular meanings, obviously constructed, yet it emanates, at the same time, from concrete historical narratives about Shaykh Ḥusayn and the shrine, from a particular past, located at a specific place. The traditional is intrinsically present in the rituals and in the shrine's guardians, whose own history is intimately connected with the traditions of the shrine, and who consequently are endowed with a distinct spiritual power, *karāma*.¹⁶ This power has allegedly enabled them to heal, to perform miracles, and to bless and curse people at will, which in turn makes them highly respected and feared by the Oromo throughout Bale.

LOSS OF POWER

The main leadership position rested within the imām family for nearly two centuries, yet came to an abrupt end in 1977 when Imām Maḥmūd Muḥammad Sayyid was forced to step down and leave Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn. There are several diverging narrations of what actually

¹⁵ Within a Sufi context, *darga* (cf. *dargāh*) usually refers to a Sufi gathering or assembly and can also mean a site for Sufi rituals.

¹⁶ While *karāma* in Arabic signifies miracles performed by those who possess *baraka*, the word is commonly used in Bale as the very ability or power to perform miracles (cf. Minako Ishihara, 'Textual Analysis of a Poetic Verse in a Muslim Oromo Society in Jimma Area, Southwestern Ethiopia', *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 43 (1996): 207–32, at 208.

happened and why the imām had to flee. The view among the *sakīna* community (to which I will return) is that Imām Maḥmūd was becoming increasingly unpopular, and that he was chased out by the local community. The imām family, on the other hand, links the event to the *Sowra*¹⁷ and the imām's involvement in anti-governmental activities. The *Sowra* refers to the armed rebellion organized under the Somali Abbo Liberation Front (SALF), which was a continuation of the so-called Bale Rebellion (1963–1970) and culminated in the Ogaden war (1977–1978). It was driven by immediate factors such as tax-pressure and land alienation, coupled with grievances of an ethno-religious nature, which had their roots in the forced incorporation of Bale into the Ethiopian kingdom in 1892. This had brought the northern Amhara as administrators and feudal landlords, and led to the loss of political, socio-economic, and cultural power for the indigenous Oromo, resulting in a tense, antagonistic relationship between the two.

The leadership at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn was always forced to relate to the Ethiopian state, and the state–shrine relationship was characterized by a combination of shifting mutual cooption, suspicion, and courting. During the Italian occupation (1935–1941), Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn was in 1937 formalized as an imamate—together with the establishment of Sude (Arsi) and Raytu (Bale) as sultanates. Imām Maḥmūd, Sultan Sude, and Fitawrari Nuho Dadhi of Raytu were also sent to Rome where they met with Mussolini.¹⁸ This policy was obviously related to the Italians' effort to form an alliance with the Muslims against the dominant Christian elite. The shrine leadership's relations to Emperor Haile Sellassie were in general characterized by mutual respect. But the unrest in the 1960s spurred the Emperor to court the shrine leadership more actively, and in 1964 he made a highly publicized trip to Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn, visiting the saint's grave, expressing respect for the shrine, and promising the community a school.

During the armed rebellion, Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn soon became an important scene for the enactment of this political drama. It was the meeting place for exchanging news and collecting support for the struggle. Here, activists from various parts of south-eastern Ethiopia and Somalia could maintain contacts and coordinate the insurgency.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Sowra* is an Oromofication of the Arabic term *al-thawra*, meaning revolution, rebellion, upheaval or riot.

¹⁸ Terje Østebø, *Localising Salafism: Religious Change among Oromo Muslims in Bale, Ethiopia* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 127.

¹⁹ Ioan M. Lewis, 'The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) and the Legacy of Sheikh Hussein of Bale' in Robert L. Hess (ed.), *Modern Ethiopia from the Ascension of Menelik II to the Present. Proceedings of the Fifth International*

While the imām family was not collectively involved in the rebellion, some individual members played a pivotal role during the 1960s by gathering moral and material support for the rebels. Things changed dramatically on 12 November 1977 when a small plane arrived at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn. A landing strip had been constructed at the shrine to transport pilgrims to the biannual festivals, and the common practice was that Ethiopian Airlines, prior to the pilgrimage season, would send a small plane with an engineer to prepare the strip. As it landed, the plane was immediately captured by the *Sowra* fighters: it was torched and the pilot and the engineer were taken hostage and brought to Somalia. Reportedly, Imām Maḥmūd was not involved in any of these events, yet knowing that he would be held accountable for the incident, he decided to flee. He and his close family walked, escorted by *Sowra* fighters, through the Ogaden dessert to Somalia, where he was well-received. The Somali regime provided him with a house in Mogadishu, where he stayed for 14 years.

Back at the shrine, the absence of the imām left the door for competition for power wide open. At the same time, the shrine and the pilgrimage were to be deeply affected by two particular sets of developments. The first relates to the Salafi reform movement that arrived in Bale during the 1960s. Determined to purify Islam from what were perceived to be illegitimate practices, the Salafis targeted the pilgrimage to Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn. They denounced as *shirk* (associating other beings with God) the practice of bringing sacrifices to the shrine in return for the guardians' blessings, and depicted these practices as a misuse of power and as exploitation of the poor pilgrims. Warning against excessive expenditure and urging hard work and economic self-reliance, the Salafis saw shrine sacrifices as contradicting Islam's message of social justice.²⁰

The second set of developments was set in motion with the revolution in 1974 which brought an end to Emperor Haile Sellassie's regime and

Conference of Ethiopian Studies (Nice, 19–22 December 1977) (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1980), 410; Umer Nure, 'Pilgrimage to Dirre Sheikh Hussein', 77.

²⁰ For more details on the history of Salafism in Bale, see Østebø, *Localising Salafism*. For similar developments in other parts of Africa, see Ousmane Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Kai Kresse, '“Making People Think”: The Ramadan Lectures of Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir in Mombasa (1491 A.H.)' in Scott Reese (ed.), *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 212–43; Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997).

centuries of feudal rule. The new Marxist-oriented Derg²¹ regime intensified the policy of modernization started by Emperor Haile Sellassie. Modern ‘hardware’—in the form of technological innovations, industrialization, and urbanization—was not obvious in a context like Ethiopia. Modernization meant, rather, the expansion of the state’s bureaucratic structures and legal frameworks, ubiquitous plans for economic development, and the proliferation of mass education. Modernization was explicitly a state-driven project, framed within a paradigm of economic development and progress, which extended the state as an impersonal entity into the different localities.²² A pivotal aspect of this process was the emergence of new modes of thinking about selfhood, time, and change—which Donham has labeled the ‘metanarrative of modernism’. His point is that modernity brought a new reckoning of time which ‘was linearized as the past was separated from the present, and expectations reoriented toward the future’,²³ which in turn ‘altered peoples’ imaginations—their sense of their place in the world and the shape of their pasts and their future’.²⁴

Modernity was framed within the ideas of scientific socialism, in which a policy of secularism was explicitly formulated. The Derg regime thus came to view religion as incompatible with its project of building a new and prosperous Ethiopia, and associated the country’s allegedly backward and reactionary past with religious forces of apathy and fatalism. This directly affected Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn, which was seen as a representation of primitive superstition, contradicting the ideals of the revolution. The shrine was also targeted because of its connections to the anti-government rebellions, consequently leading the regime to discourage people from going on pilgrimage, keep the shrine under close surveillance, and repeatedly harass wandering mystics associated with the shrine.

The political and socio-economic developments during the Derg regime and increasing pressure from the Salafi movement had significant impacts on the pilgrimage and the character of the shrine. The number of

²¹ The word literally means ‘committee’, signifying the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, and was subsequently used as the term for the Marxist regime in power from 1974 to 1991.

²² Cf. Stacy Leigh Pigg, ‘The Credible and Credulous: The Question of Villagers’ Beliefs in Nepal’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 11/2 (1996): 160–201.

²³ Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xviii. This is similar to Habermas’ thesis, in which he argues that modernism opened up a new conceptualization of history and a new consciousness about the future, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 1–22.

pilgrims decreased markedly, affecting the rituals of sacrifice, and consequently dramatically reducing the community's income. This in turn generated a certain degree of 'corruption'—in which individuals or groups of individuals were constantly feuding over the income of the offering, for the accumulation of their own personal wealth. It even caused the community to start tilling the land around the shrine—an activity which had been forbidden due to the land's nature as sacred space.²⁵

The imām's flight gave the Derg regime the opportunity to restructure the leadership at the shrine. The person immediately put in charge after Imām Maḥmūd was Shaykh Sa'd Qāḍī Aḥmad Imāma, from the imām family. He never held any real power, and was soon replaced by individuals appointed directly by the Derg authorities, all of whom were from the *sakīna* community. The overall authority for the shrine was organized under the Peasant Association (PA), an administrative unit introduced by the Derg regime.²⁶ As appointees of an increasingly totalitarian regime, the PA leaders could only to a very limited degree exercise any real power, and were not in any position to voice any opposition. The PA leadership was of a political nature, it answered to an outside entity, and was based upon notions very different from those inherent to the shrine. The shrine's ritual authorities were formerly subordinate to the PA leadership, yet tried to maintain a degree of autonomy. With the chair of the imām left vacant, this exacerbated the fragile situation characterized by constant power struggles, where members of Shaykh 'Abbās' family and people from the *sakīna* community were vying for leadership-positions.²⁷

The imām family was obviously not content with the situation at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn, and continued to view the shrine's legitimate authority as belonging to their lineage. News about the leadership situation reached Imām Maḥmūd in Somalia, who tried to campaign for his position. A highly interesting letter issued on 3 August 1979 by the Somali Ministry of Justice and Religious affairs officially states that Imām Maḥmūd is to be recognized as the supreme leader of Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn.²⁸ The letter was sent to various governmental offices within Mogadishu, but had no obvious impact on the situation at the

²⁵ Umer Nure, 'Pilgrimage to Dirre Sheikh Hussein', 86.

²⁶ Ibid, 33.

²⁷ Jeannie Miller, 'Prophecy as History: The Political Content of Mystical Stories at the Shrine of Sheikh Hussein' (unpublished ms., 2005), 6. (The author of this paper has a copy of this ms.)

²⁸ Letter from the Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs, no. DIIN/III/9-619/87, 3 August 1979.

shrine. Very little is known about the context of the letter, yet one must assume that the absentee imām approached the Somali authorities pleading his case. It is interesting that he would involve the Somalis in such a matter, and noteworthy that the Somali regime, which by then had turned to ‘scientific socialism’, endorsed his claim for leadership.

The imām family remaining at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn after Imām Maḥmūd fled also made attempts to win the support of the political authorities. When the leaders from the *sakīna* community in 1987 tried to modify the main and oldest mosque at the shrine, the imām family, led by *Qenazmach* ‘Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad appealed to the central authorities. The Ministry of Culture and Sports Affairs reacted decisively, ordering any modifications of the mosque to stop. Defining the shrine as part of Ethiopia’s national heritage, the ministry declared itself as the body responsible for the shrine, stating that the ministry had ‘jurisdiction on such matters, and not the believers’.²⁹ While the imām family today refers to this incident as a proof of how the regime recognized their legitimate authority over the shrine, there was in reality not much they could do to improve their situation. With Imām Maḥmūd gone, the shrine subject to the political structures of the regime, and faced with competition from the ‘Abbās family and the *sakīna*, the imām family remained marginalized throughout the Derg period.

THE ‘RESTORATION’ OF THE IMĀM INSTITUTION

The Derg regime came to an end in 1991, overthrown by what was to become the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Determined to redress the former regimes’ centrist policies and the perceived historical dominance of the Amhara, the EPRDF emphasized Ethiopia’s diversity and made an effort to recognize the rights of different ethnic and religious groups. The new regime consequently introduced a decentralized structure of ethnic federalism which reorganized the country’s administrative regions according to ethno-linguistic boundaries. It moreover emphasized religious freedom and equality, and reversed earlier restrictions on religious activities. This new policy was highly welcomed by the Muslim population, which experienced the new era as a major step away from past discriminations, in turn making them supportive of the EPRDF.

²⁹ Letter from the Ministry of Culture and Sports Affairs, no. 50/T-90/912/9, 12 July 1988.

The change in government did not bring significant changes for the leadership situation at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn, where the main positions remained in the hands of the *sakīna* community. The PA structure has been kept intact, while the administration of the shrine's rituals is said to be overseen by a separate committee. While the actual size and composition of this committee is not clear, there is a particular trio that seems to exercise substantial power. The main figure is a certain Shaykh Khaḍīr Shaykh Muḥammad, based in Adama (a city close to Addis Ababa), who portrays himself as the main leadership figure. The other two are Shaykh Khaḍīr Ḥajj Aḥmad and Shaykh 'Umar Shaykh Aliyeh, both claimed by Shaykh Khaḍīr Shaykh Muḥammad to be his representatives at the shrine.³⁰ The former of the two oversees the practical administration of the pilgrimage, while the latter is claimed to play a more explicit religious role. He leads the ceremonies, collects the offerings, and blesses the pilgrims.

After the downfall of the Derg regime in 1991, Imām Maḥmūd returned from Somalia and settled in Ginir, a town about 100 km east of Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn. His relations to the *sakīna* leadership at the shrine remained tense and unresolved, yet he made no determined attempts to reclaim his position, and in 2003 he passed away. A few years later, however, the imām family started campaigning more actively for the leadership of the shrine—putting forward Imām Maḥmūd's son, Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn Imām Maḥmūd as their candidate.

Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn was born in 1942 at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn. He started learning the Qur'ān at the shrine, before continuing studying *ilm* (Islamic sciences) in the surrounding villages. In 1959 he moved to Addis Ababa to start schooling and to live with his mother, who had divorced Imām Maḥmūd. After completing eighth grade, he moved back to Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn, where he got married. The imām family was trying to prepare him for the position of imām of the shrine, but in the early 1970s he and his wife moved back to the capital. There he started working at Bambis, a Greek-owned supermarket frequented by Addis Ababa's expatriate population, a job he kept after the Derg regime nationalized the business, before leaving voluntarily in 1981. His father, Imām Maḥmūd had then gone to Saudi Arabia for the ḥajj, and Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn planned to meet up with him in Makka. The two missed each other, but Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn stayed in Makka for three years before returning to Addis Ababa. Unable to find employment, he went back to school in the early 1990s, finishing high school and getting a certificate in accounting through night school. He remained unemployed, and has up

³⁰ Interview with Muḥammad Khaḍīr (pseudonym), Adama, 13 July 2011.

to now served as a Qurʾān teacher and as an imām in one of his neighbourhood mosques.³¹

The ‘restoration’ of the imāmate took place on 21 July 2005, when 69 individuals from the imām family held a meeting at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn and signed a document installing Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn as the highest authority at the shrine. The written statement declared that ‘from now onwards, he is to be addressed as ‘Imām’ and has to carry out his responsibilities as the leader’.³² He was charged with the duty of leading all the shrine’s rituals, and to wear the ring and the ceremonial clothes of Imām Maḥmūd. Through this symbolically charged notion, the broken link back to Shaykh Muḥammad Tilma Tilmo was said to have been restored.

The very nature of the imām family’s claim and the narratives it is based upon are highly interesting. It is commonly agreed that Shaykh Ḥusayn called Shaykh Muḥammad Tilma Tilmo to the shrine, that the latter possessed *karāma*, and that this quality was transferred to his descendants. Yet the imām family downplays these narratives in its current claims to leadership of the shrine. These local themes are only explicitly raised in the process of ‘othering’ the current leaders at the shrine; the imām family denounces them as imposters and accuses them of having forged their claims to spiritual power. Shaykh ‘Umar Shaykh ‘Aliyeh, who is believed by many to have significant *karāma*, is, for example, accused of being a ‘madman’, and of cheating the people for his own personal enrichment. As argued by one informant: ‘how can he have *karāma* when he does not fast or pray?’³³ While displays of piety and compliance with Islam’s main obligatory practices are common criteria for recognizing *karāma* within Sufi traditions, this has never been much emphasized among the guardians of Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn. Instead, they have defined *karāma* as the ability to perform miracles and bestow effective blessings. It is therefore interesting to note this change in reference-point for spiritual power; a shift away from more localized perceptions to notions in line with generic Islamic thinking.

While understating the importance of the localized notion of *karāma*, the imām family does make references to genealogy and inheritance. As the only living son of Imām Maḥmūd, Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn belongs to the lineage going directly back to Shaykh Muḥammad Tilma Tilmo, who constitutes the foundation for legitimate authority. The time-period with no imām is considered anomalous, and only by reinstating a descendant

³¹ This account is based on interviews in Addis Ababa, 4 and 11 June 2011, and on a short unpublished autobiography by Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn.

³² Minutes from the meeting, 21 July 2005 (in the possession of the author).

³³ Interview with Muḥammad ‘Umar (pseudonym), Addis Ababa, 4 June 2011.

from the first imām can this precarious situation be mended. The same narrative of genealogy is applied in the process of ‘othering’ the current leadership at the shrine. Contrasted with the imām family, the *sakīna* leaders are portrayed as recent arrivals, as outsiders without history at the shrine, as foreigners, intruders, and consequently as illegitimate authorities.

Rather than drawing from the traditional narratives at play within the shrine’s localized spiritual universe, Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn firmly situates his claims for authority in a different paradigm. This is particularly noticeable in the way he refers to the legal framework of the Ethiopian state, interpreted in his own particular way, and selectively appropriated to fit his case. During one of my visits to his home, he showed me a legal document containing a law passed during the Derg period. Still judicially valid, one of the articles in the law defines religious sites as so-called special areas, and grants to such spaces a certain judicial autonomy where the state has self-restricted its authority. Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn interprets this statute as a proof of the state’s recognition of the shrine’s special status, which he then uses as a means to legitimize his claim to authority. He relates this directly to the PA structures and the present PA leadership—controlled by the *sakīna* community—which consequently are defined as an alien, illegitimate, and illegal body. This is also a strategy for acquiring real power, and reflects his frustration that his formal appointment of imām has not had practical consequences—as his authority is curbed by the continued opposition of the *sakīna* leadership.

Both the legal statute and Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn’s usage of it demonstrate the concurrence of the traditional and the modern, how they both remain intertwined with the local, and how they can be discursively activated. On the one hand, it is noticeable that the Derg regime, which was determined to curtail any alternative power structures and combat ‘irrational’ forces, nevertheless granted religious sites some special judicial status. It arguably demonstrates how the traditional was maintained and revered within a modern paradigm that emphasized linear progress and which paradoxically set out to negate the traditional. From Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn’s side, it is interesting to see how his creative interpretation of the legal code both acknowledges and negates the modern. Using the state’s judicial framework to justify his claim for leadership, and thereby recognizing the state’s authority, he simultaneously inverts this with the purpose of restricting its authority. What he does is to appropriate concepts situated within a modern impersonal legal apparatus in arguing for the exclusiveness of the shrine as something traditional. It effectively demarcates the shrine’s boundary vis-à-vis the state, as beyond its reach, and posits the imām institution as independent of any involvement of the state. It is intriguing to observe

how easily Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn balances these different narratives. He does not consciously define one or the other as traditional or modern, and neither does he see the two as exclusive opposites—where the traditional is a marginalized legacy of the past, currently being superseded by the modern. As very much present realities, the two are available for appropriation—becoming strategies for shaping the social realities and for situating agency.

The imām family has, moreover, gone a step further by explicitly involving the state in its quest for the leadership position, and has in this way initiated a process which seems, at first glance, to be quite contradictory. While emphasizing the shrine as beyond the state's reach, the imām family approached, at the same time, the political authorities immediately after the meeting and the signing of the document at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn in 2005. The minutes from the meeting were sent over to the Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau, and representatives from the imām family argued that the decision constituted the 'restoration' of the traditional legitimate leadership of the shrine. Interesting to note in this regard is the family's emphasis on Shaykh Muḥammad Tilma Tilmo's role in constructing the cupola and the main buildings of the shrine, in digging ponds used as water sources, as well as the imām family's legacy in maintaining the shrine as a historical site. It is clear that this was deliberately done with the purpose of crafting a narrative that dovetailed with the Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau's renewed interest in the shrine—underscoring it as part of Ethiopia's national heritage.

THE POLITICS OF THE TRADITIONAL

As the Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau assumed formal authority for safeguarding and preserving all the region's cultural heritages in 2000, the political authorities gradually paid more attention to Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn. This could be observed in the construction of a new all-weather road to Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn, the establishment of bus services facilitating travel for the pilgrims, and the erection of road signs along the way, wishing pilgrims a safe journey. Furthermore, in 2005, the regional authorities installed a generator and provided potable water to Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn.³⁴ A few years ago, a new road was completed, passing through the village, and connecting Bale with the northern area of Hararge. Parallel to this, higher government officials, such as the former presidents of the Oromia National Regional State, Juneydin

³⁴ Miller, *Property as History*, 5.

Saddo and Abba Dula Gamada, have on several occasions attended the annual pilgrimage ceremonies.

The political authorities were, however, little concerned with the ongoing leadership struggle at the shrine. The different public reports about the shrine's history and cultural meaning reveal that the authorities in fact had limited knowledge about the ongoing tensions. There are references to the legacy of Shaykh Muḥammad Tilma Tilmo, but nothing about later developments and the current divisions. This was to change, however, when the imām family engaged the authorities in its decision to install Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn as the new imām at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn. The controversy that this created within the shrine community (see below), soon prompted the authorities to intervene and, in October 2005, representatives from the Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau and the regional government, together with leading figures from the imām family, travelled to Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn to settle the case. The attempt failed, and tensions continued to linger. The head of the Bureau underlined, in an interview with me, that the office remained neutral in the case, that they had no mandate to impose any decision, and that the matter was to be solved by the local community.³⁵ This is in stark contrast to the office's two letters he signed in June and November 2006, confirming Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn's status as the imām and the highest authority at the shrine, and ordering that this be respected. The latter letter specifically condemns the groups who oppose Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn, accusing them of obstructing the work of the Bureau.³⁶

Of particular importance is the letter's explicit mention of the plan to include Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn in UNESCO's World Heritage List, which commenced in the early 2000s.³⁷ It underlines that one of UNESCO's criteria is the existence of local administrative structures effectively managing the site, and demonstrates thus that the political authorities' sudden interest in the leadership situation at the shrine was directly connected to this project. This was confirmed by an official directly

³⁵ Interview (name withheld), Addis Ababa, 13 October 2006.

³⁶ Letter from the Oromia Regional Government, Cultural & Tourism Bureau, no. P-S-M-D-S-H/6/1669/98, 17 June 2006; Letter from the Oromia Regional Government, Cultural & Tourism Bureau, no. 5/M/2/D/6101199, 24 November 2006 (in the possession of the author, and available in the archives of the Oromia Cultural & Tourism Bureau, Addis Ababa).

³⁷ See 'Natural and Cultural Properties to Be Inscribed in the World Heritage List from Bale Zone' (Robe: unpublished report issued by the Bale Zone Cultural and Information Department, 1998). Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn was submitted to UNESCO in 2011, and is currently on UNESCO's tentative list of World Heritage Centers: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5649>. (Last accessed: 21 November 2012.)

charged with overseeing the process: ‘The Federal Ministry of Culture came to us and ordered us to re-establish the traditional leadership structure’.³⁸ The narrative the regime is putting out to achieve this goal underscores the shrine’s historical legacy and highlights its inherent traditional values, while, at the same time, couching this in the language of contemporary political discourse—related to EPRDF’s own political agenda and to its objectives for national development. While presuming it is maintaining the shrine’s traditional character, it effectively contributes to its reconstruction.

Most noticeable is the underscoring of the shrine’s ancient character—said to be over 900 years old. The historical accuracy of Shaykh Ḥusayn and the pilgrimage as an unbroken practice since the twelfth century are uncritically accepted. While the official storyline does not explicitly confirm Shaykh Ḥusayn’s status as a *walī* and his spiritual power, stories about healings and miracles are not questioned—consequently producing a narrative where distinctions between the shrine as a historical site and its religious character tend to be blurred. While the believers’ points of view are repeatedly recognized and their emotional devotion to the shrine is accounted for, the official narrative does, at the same time, complain about the local community’s overemphasis on the shrine’s religious character and their failure to understand the shrine’s cultural and historical value for the present.

The regime’s narrative also underlines and celebrates the tolerant character of the shrine which in turn becomes an important argument for its preservation. A prominent aspect repeatedly mentioned is the shrine’s role in transcending ethnic and religious boundaries, and enhancing understanding between different groups. Attracting both Muslim and Christian pilgrims from a range of ethnicities, the shrine is said to have an integrative effect—bringing people together and facilitating intercultural and inter-religious co-existence. Rituals at the shrine are construed as flexible and syncretistic, and claimed to include an elaborate system for conflict resolution which potentially could serve as a model for other contexts. By appropriating traditional values and underscoring concepts like social codes, maintenance of law and order, cultural exchange, solidarity, unity, cooperation, and tolerance, the regime reconfigures the shrine to become a resource in the struggle against ethnic and social tensions—viewed as detrimental to national development. Even more so, the shrine is presented as a universal model for the enhancement of peace, for inter-religious coexistence,

³⁸ Interview with Ḥusayn ‘Umar (pseudonym), Addis Ababa, 3 August 2011.

for the mediation of conflicts, and for the enhancement of human dignity.³⁹

The official narrative also praises the shrine's moral values. Its pilgrims are said to display a distinctive piety, in which honesty, communal care, and respect for elders and tradition are highlighted. Particularly emphasized is how class divisions and social inequality are mended through the practice of redistributing the pilgrims' offerings. By presenting this as a particular form of social welfare, the shrine's rituals thus effectively dovetail with the regime's policy of combating poverty.⁴⁰ Another aspect is the reference to modern notions of gender equality, and the claim that the shrine is enhancing the status of women. It is said that during the shrine's festivals, 'activities like fetching water, collecting firewood, making coffee, which [are] considered as women's responsibility, [are] undertaken mostly by males'.⁴¹ In addition, the shrine's practices are presented as having environmental significance, and it is argued that the rituals serve as a means to protect the surrounding area's vulnerable flora and fauna.⁴²

Besides being framed within the state's narrative for socio-economic development, another important dimension is how the regional Oromo authorities actively situate the shrine within a distinct Oromo history, and celebrate it as a site for Oromo traditions, values, and culture. The shrine is seen as a representation of an inherently essentialized Oromo culture, which in turn is related to the construction of a contested Oromo nationalism. While this has been defined and voiced by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which since the early 1970s has engaged the successive Ethiopian regimes in armed struggle for the establishment of an independent Oromia, the EPRDF sought to buttress this by the creation of its own loyalist Oromo party—the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO)—in the early 1990s. The OPDO has tried to launch an alternative state-controlled Oromo nationalism, working to enhance Oromo consciousness within the parameters of a unified Ethiopian state and under the leadership of the EPRDF. By seeking to balance the image of Ethiopia as the home of ancient Christianity, rock-hewn churches, and the Solomonic dynasty, OPDO

³⁹ Areba Abdella, Abel Gezahegn, and Ibrahim Kaso, *Dirre Sheikh Hussein Shrine to Be Inscribed in the Regional, National and World Heritage List* (Robe: Bale Zone Cultural and Tourism Office, 2003), 12; Sintayehu Tola, *The Conservation of Dirre Sheikh Hussein Heritage Site* (Addis Ababa: Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau, n.d.), 10.

⁴⁰ Areba Abdella *et al.*, *Dirre Sheikh Hussein Shrine*, 4 f.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴² Sintayehu Tola, *Conservation of Dirre Sheikh Hussein*, 7.

has deliberately sought out physical sites, institutions, and practices which are re-configured, and sometimes invented, as Oromo alternatives to the alleged 'Abyssinian dominance'.

The OPDO has been only partially successful in portraying itself as the guarantor and promoter of Oromo nationalism in Bale. The region's history of anti-government insurgency, as already discussed, has in general produced negative sentiments towards central authorities, and the population has remained distrustful of the OPDO. Being aware of this, the OPDO has in return embarked on different paths to bolster support for its nationalist narrative, which include targeting specific constituencies like the Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn community. This clientelist strategy reached its peak in the period leading up to the national elections in 2005, which also coincided with the intensification of the shrine's leadership struggle. Much of the regime's development investments at the shrine, mentioned above, were directly related to the election, as a means for the authorities to secure the votes of the local community. Only a month prior to that election, Juneydin Saddo, the president of the Oromia National Regional State made a high-profile visit to Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn—arriving with a procession of thirty cars—to inaugurate the installation of potable water.⁴³ The authorities clearly believed that the guardians of the shrines had substantial influence, and by courting them, they calculated on extending their control over the pilgrimage population.

The state-driven ethno-nationalist rhetoric moreover intersected with the regime's underscoring of Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn as a symbol of the true indigenous Islam of Bale, seen 'as a unique testimony of a particularly tolerant and accommodating nature of Islam'.⁴⁴ This form of Islam has lately been conceptualized in the Amharic term *yehager beqel Islam*—home-grown Islam. Repeatedly used by former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the term refers to so-called traditional, moderate, and tolerant Ethiopian Islam, seen as being under attack by the intolerant and foreign 'Wahhabism'. The official reports claimed that pilgrims to Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn were being verbally and physically attacked by 'fanatic religious groups'.⁴⁵ Although these groups remain unspecified, it is clear that the charges were directed against the dominant Salafi Islam of Bale—a movement which the regime seeks to

⁴³ Miller, *Prophecy as History*, 4. The election results from 2005 showed that the ruling party received around 75 per cent of the votes in Jarra constituency, where the shrine is located (<http://electionsethiopia.org/oromia.aspx>). (Last accessed: 6 February 2008.)

⁴⁴ Sintayehu Tola, *Conservation of Dirre Sheikh Hussein*, 8.

⁴⁵ Areba Abdella et al., *Dirre Sheikh Hussein Shrine*, 13.

discredit as ‘extremist Islam’ or ‘fundamentalist Islam’. The regime’s interest and investments in the shrine must thus also be read as an attempt to strengthen it as a bulwark against this version of Islam; something dovetailing with the policies of international actors, particularly those of the US. The Americans—who in a similar vein view current Islamic reformism as ‘foreign’, as ‘Wahhabi’ and as Saudi-funded ‘cultural imperialism’ attempting to subvert ‘moderate Sufi Ethiopian Islam’—have initiated what is called ‘cultural programming’. This means that the US embassy in Ethiopia has provided development aid to a range of places, objects, and traditions related to ‘indigenous Muslim communities’.⁴⁶ Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn has been defined as important in this regard, and received in 2005 a grant from the embassy of US\$ 25,600 for the restoration of its buildings.⁴⁷

RESISTING THE IMĀM

The imām family’s decision to ‘restore’ the imām was obviously ill-received by the *sakīna* leadership. It intensified tensions within the community, and produced a counter-campaign by the *sakīna* leaders, who refused to relinquish their positions, and who went a long way in defaming the imām family and ridiculing its claim. In spite of his formal installment, Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn has up until now remained a leader with no real authority and with no practical significance.

The rationale of the *sakīna* leadership in legitimizing their own positions and denouncing the claims by the imām family is similar to the other narratives discussed above, constructed with reference to an interesting amalgam of different ideas. It entails a combination of inherently localized narratives about *karāma* and genealogies, notions of class-struggle stemming from the Derg period, and present-day concepts of democracy and liberal rights.

While the *sakīna* leadership refer to the notion of possessing *karāma*, this is not expressed in terms of being able to perform miracles. The only

⁴⁶ Much of this has been channeled through the Ambassador’s Self-Help Fund, the Democracy and Human Rights Fund, and the Ambassador’s Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP). See Wikileaks.org, ‘Countering Wahabi Influence in Ethiopia through Cultural Programming’, Cable from US Embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/07/09ADDISABABA1675.html>. (Last accessed: 9 November 2011.)

⁴⁷ See The United States Embassy in Addis Ababa, ‘Awareness Creation on Cultural Preservation in Dire Sheikh Hussein’: <http://ethiopia.usembassy.gov/pasnews01.html>. (Last accessed: 27 April 2010.)

one claiming such ability is Shaykh ʿUmar Shaykh ʿAliyeh. However, the *sakīna* leadership remain ambivalent about this claim, indicating that they might not believe it to be true.⁴⁸ The only reason why his claim is not explicitly challenged is probably his ability to collect revenues—in the form of sacrifices—from the pilgrims; resources that the leadership collectively benefit from.

Shaykh ʿUmar Shaykh ʿAliyeh also claims that he was called to the shrine by Shaykh Ḥusayn, thus basing his presence at the shrine entirely on a direct relationship to him. Such ideas are also forwarded by the other *sakīna* leaders who relate their *karāma* to their spiritual contacts with the *walī*. Shaykh Khaḍīr Ḥajj Aḥmad argues, for example, that it was Shaykh Ḥusayn who called him to assume leadership at the shrine: ‘I wanted to be a merchant, I wanted to travel. But Shaykh Ḥusayn came to me in a dream and said: “I will give you work, you will be an *abba kara*”.’⁴⁹ Narratives about direct calling and spiritual links to the saint become a powerful means to situate them in a unique position, and to bypass and undermine the imām family’s history. These alleged connections to Shaykh Ḥusayn, which legitimize the *sakīna* leaders’ positions, could possibly be construed as the construction of novel traditions for their own purpose. They are not, however, arbitrary inventions dislocated from the actors’ own experiences and isolated from the immediate context. Callings mediated through dreams have been intrinsic to the traditions revolving around the shrine, and have been a common part of African Islam in general.⁵⁰ The narratives are also related to the *sakīna* leaders’ own lineages’ role at the shrine—which are underscored and reconfigured. Both Shaykh Khaḍīr Ḥajj Aḥmad and Shaykh Khaḍīr Shaykh Muḥammad point to how their families arrived at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn several generations ago, arguing that their forefathers have held important positions at the shrine. The latter’s grandfather, Shaykh Muḥammad Thānī Reju, arrived at the shrine after allegedly spending 15 years studying and teaching in Makka. While the narratives contain vague references to the forefathers’ *karāma*, said to have been transferred along their respective lineages, more noticeable is

⁴⁸ Interview with Muḥammad Khaḍīr (pseudonym), Adama, 3 June 2011.

⁴⁹ Literally ‘father of the gate’, the expression denotes a leader of a shrine or sacred space. Interview with Aḥmad Muḥammad (pseudonym), Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn, 5 June 2006.

⁵⁰ Tim Carmichael, ‘A Note on Shaykh Husayn of Bale and Dreams’ <http://www.sidamaconcern.com/timcarm.html> (last accessed: 11 June 2007); Humphrey Fisher, ‘Dreams and Conversion in Black Africa’ in Nehemia Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979), 217–35.

the emphasis on their families' roles in constructing, maintaining and preserving the shrine's buildings. For example, Shaykh Khaḍīr, Shaykh Muḥammad's father, expanded the shrine's main mosque in the 1970s—something which created a deep conflict with the imām family. This incident then becomes an aspect to which both parties relate, but which the *sakīna* leaders contrast with the imām family's narrative—which constantly returns to the role of Shaykh Muḥammad Tilma Tilmo in erecting the shrine's main dome, and which emphasizes the lineage's importance in maintaining the site. On the one hand, the *sakīna* leaders' narrative both recognizes the imām family's history and projects the *sakīna* leaders into the story. On the other hand, their narrative surpasses that of the imām family by producing an identical, yet completely alternative narrative. Ideas and notions transferred from a past are thus continuously and actively made relevant in the present. This past consists of concrete historical incidents and developments, which are remembered, interpreted, and utilized disparately by the actors involved.

In addition to circumventing the imām family's historical narratives, Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn and the imām family are said to have lost their *karāma*. While it is generally accepted that a person, because of impiety and poor ritual performance, can lose his or her *karāma*, it is interesting to note how in this case it is reconfigured and given a somewhat different meaning. *Karāma* and performance are here intersected with Ethiopian political history and current political discourses, by which the imām family's behaviour is evaluated and condemned. Recounting the flight of Imām Maḥmūd in 1977, the *sakīna* leadership never refers to the incident of the captured aeroplane, but claims instead that he was ousted and driven out by the local community. Depicted as an oppressive landlord, a reactionary representative of the feudal past, and associated with the Imperial government, the imām's alleged dictatorial leadership-style made him increasingly unpopular:

During that time, he used the police to arrest people. Imām Maḥmūd was not a good man during the reign of Haile Sellassie. He pushed the people. He took all the power and the income from the people—he didn't share anything with them. There was a great conflict between him and the community.⁵¹

According to the present leadership of the shrine, this situation augmented the people's grievances and opposition toward the imām family, eventually causing them to revolt. Shaykh Khaḍīr Shaykh Muḥammad argues that he 'organized the groups suppressed by the imām family', which included those from 'the lowlands, the shepherds,

⁵¹ Interview with Aḥmad Muḥammad (pseudonym), Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn, 5 June 2006.

and the servants'.⁵² He explicitly relates this to the notion of class-struggle and to the political sentiments of the Derg period, saying that 'we heard about all the suppressed groups claiming their rights around the country, and we used the same ideas'.⁵³ The leadership struggle comes in this way to be framed within a narrative wherein the poor and the oppressed were fighting for their rights, and which presents the *sakīna* leadership as the revolutionary vanguard, answering to the people's aspirations. The revolt and the ousting of Imām Maḥmūd and the imām family thus become the final confirmation of being cursed—and deprived of *karāma*.

The *sakīna* leaders are also, along similar lines, framing arguments in a language that corresponds to present-day political rhetoric. First, the emphasis on their families' efforts in maintaining and preserving the shrine must be seen in relation to the political authorities' view of the shrine as an important cultural heritage, which they utilize and try to fit into their own narrative of legitimizing their claims. Second, the *sakīna* leaders also frame their story within the current regime's emphasis on democracy and political rights. Such concepts have been a crucial part of the EPRDF's programme of contrasting its policy with former ones, in which decentralized rule, political freedom, and the rule of law have been underscored.⁵⁴ The *sakīna* leadership consequently resists the idea that all power should exclusively be held by one person and hereditarily confined to one family. Instead, it is argued that authority should be shared, and that the leader should be democratically elected. This is allegedly the case for the PA officials, claimed to be chosen according to particular local criteria. Only those native to Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn are eligible candidates, and a candidate cannot have had held any political position during the Imperial or the Derg period. Membership of the OPDO is, moreover, obligatory.

The *sakīna* leadership's efforts to accommodate to the OPDO's policies became even more imperative when tensions around the shrine's leadership erupted, coinciding with the national elections in 2005. Central to these elections was the issue of ethnicity, and the different parties' campaigns made direct appeals to their respective ethnic constituencies. A major opponent of the regime was the Coalition of Unity and Democracy (CUD), which the OPDO in the Oromo areas portrayed as an 'Amhara party', one that sought to bring Ethiopia back to former centrist rule and Amhara domination. The *sakīna* leadership,

⁵² Interview with Muḥammad Khaḍīr (pseudonym), Adama, 13 July 2011.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ It should be added that there is a significant gap between what is being said and the actual democratic practices on the ground.

already linked to the OPDO through the latter's clientelist strategy, actively utilized this discourse of identity politics in its conflict with the imām family. In their efforts to delegitimize Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn, he was explicitly discredited as belonging to the 'wrong' side. Claiming to enjoy the overall support of the Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn community, the *sakīna* leadership argued that the people 'see him as a *Gobena*, as being under the Amhara... [they] see him as CUD'.⁵⁵ The word *Gobena* refers to Gobena Dache, an Oromo general who participated in Emperor Menelik's nineteenth-century conquests of southern Ethiopia, and the name is today used as a synonym for traitor among the Oromo. By comparing Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn to Gobena, denouncing him as a representative of Amhara interests, and as associated with CUD, the *sakīna* leaders sought to taint his credibility as a leader of the shrine. As a traitor and an outsider not truly representing the Oromo, his *karāma* and claim to authority were effectively denounced.

However, the political authorities' engagement on behalf of the imām family and their sanctioning of him as the legitimate imām, has obviously strained relations between the *sakīna* leadership and the regime. They feel betrayed by the regime—which they have supported and remained loyal to. Their refusal to relinquish their positions and their unwillingness to accept Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn have exacerbated tensions, in which the authorities are viewing the *sakīna* leadership as a disruptive element, and as a problem hampering their plans of getting Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn included in UNESCO's List of World Heritage Sites.

CONCLUSION

The different actors involved in the struggle over the main leadership position at the shrine have produced narratives that are situated in a universe commonly labeled as traditional as well as being associated with what we refer to as modernity. These narratives all serve particular purposes in legitimizing the actors' claims, justifying their social actions, and constitute effective means of 'othering' their opponents. It is important to note, as I have discussed, that the narratives from the past are not novel creations in the sense that the traditional is invented for a particular ideological purpose. The traditional is real by way of being embedded in concrete historical incidents, embodied in the actors' collective memories, and enacted in their social practices. Modernity is,

⁵⁵ Interview with Aḥmad Muḥammad (pseudonym), Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn, 6 June 2006.

at the same time, not merely a set of impositions brought upon the actors as passive objects, but rather something they actively shape as intrinsic to their social reality. While I have, for analytical purposes, distinguished between the traditional and the modern, it needs to be underscored that the actors are not explicitly defining one or the other as either traditional or modern, or consciously differentiating between them. The traditional and the modern are not viewed as irreconcilable opposites, nor is the traditional limited to something of the past, as something marginalized by the arrival of the modern. Instead, the traditional is very much present and intertwined with the modern. This can be seen in the ways the actors easily manoeuvre within and between such assumed opposites, appropriating them for their own purposes, and thus constantly producing new discourses about the shrine, themselves, and their social realities.

While it could be said that the concepts of the traditional and the modern are useless as analytical tools, this paper has demonstrated that they nevertheless have value. This requires, obviously, that we bypass the dated perspective that views the two as polar opposites, and, moreover, that we historicize them, that we keep a close eye on the ways they appear in concrete social contexts, and that we recognize the agency of situated actors. When approached in such a manner, the traditional and the modern may then constitute meaningful categories for investigation of the inherent dynamics characterizing human reality.

Those involved in the leadership struggle at Dirre Shaykh Ḥusayn have proven relentless in their claims for authority. At the time of writing, the conflict is far from solved. The *sakīna* leaders have remained in charge of the shrine and its rituals, while Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn has maintained his residency in Addis Ababa. He continues to campaign for his right to leadership, yet is also aware of his rather hopeless situation: 'I travel there during the pilgrimage time, but few pay attention to me. All the people from the past that knew me are dead. Nobody respects me.'⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Interview with Imām Muḥyī al-Dīn, Addis Ababa, 11 June 2011.