THE CUSHITIC-SPEAKING PEOPLES: A JIGSAW PUZZLE FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS *

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I

As Lévi-Strauss's commitment to South American Indian myths illustrates, nothing delights the student of comparative institutions more than a culture area that comprises a provocative mixture of variants and invariants. Such a fertile combination offers ethnographic laboratory conditions in which relations between form and function can be systematically studied in a much more rigorous fashion than is usually possible in cross-cultural studies, where there are too many variables to control. In this respect the Cushitic-speaking peoples have much to offer. They present a rich spectrum of cultural and social variations on several related themes, within an equally broad range of ecological conditions. This attractive combination is complemented by particularly well-documented historical data, which make it possible to add that essential corrective to the social anthropologist's myopic perspective, the dimension of time, and hence to trace relationships *temporally* as well as spatially. Since cultural diffusion cannot be ignored here, the availability of historical information becomes all the more crucial to an understanding of the facts before us. In addition, the centuries-old presence of two major religions (Christianity and Islam) and a significant undercurrent of a third (Judaism) contribute elements to an almost unique cultural cocktail cabinet to satisfy the most sophisticated tastes.

II

Before these splendid facilities can be utilized for comparative analysis, stock of the components must be taken. The initial task is to identify the pieces of the puzzle that have already been cut

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to shape, hence the following survey of the progress of recent studies by social and cultural anthropologists in this field.[1]

(a) The Agaw

The existing linguistic and historical data on the Agaw (cfr. Tubiana 1959) have now been enriched by F. C. Gamst 's much-needed field study of the Qemant (1969), an enclave near Gondar reputed to represent the best-preserved pre-Hebraic « pagan substratum » in northern Ethiopia. Based upon twelve months research in the area in 1964, Dr. Gamst's brief ethnographic profile of Qemant culture and social organization is useful (the Agaw have a moiety organisation and ambilineal descent with a patrilineal emphasis), althrough his historical account of the religion seems highly speculative. Without citing any supporting evidence, Gamst claims that shamans (sg. *balazar*) who « master » *zar* spirits represent a « survival of an earlier period before the development of a formal priesthood and pantheon. Of greater interest, perhaps, is the fact that he found nothing to confirm the established view that the Agaw sky-god (*Adara*) was originally called *zar*.

(b) The Afar

Chedeville's long-awaited summary of Afar social organization (1966), based on over twenty years' research and certainly the most significant contribution to date, is tantalizingly brief and leaves many fundamental questions unresolved. We still do not know the basis and social significance of the *'Asahyammara* - *'Adohymamra* cleavage, which runs throughout the society, nor the function and nature of the *fi'ima* associations or classes (do they correspond to Oromo *gada* sets), and the information on marriage (exogamy/endogamy) is conflicting and unsatisfactory. These and other lingering problems of Afar society and culture were being explored in depth by my colleague, Glynn Flood. Following the recent linguistic research of R. Hayward (SOAS), he worked among the Afar of the Awash Valley from 1972 until his tragic death in June 1975 (*Rain*,

[1] Remarks on the scope of this survey are in order. First, I have in general restricted myself to reporting research from 1960 on. Second, I have followed Professor Joseph Tubiana in focusing mainly on those peoples who speak what may for convenience be called « Core Cushitic. » In excluding the Beja, I have relied on better informed members of the Colloquium to speak for them, particularly so far as my own subject is concerned. Dr. Hassan Mohamed Salih has recently embarked upon an ambitious programme of field-research in this neglected area.

October 1975, pp. 5-9). Even if we are fortunate enough to recover Glynn Flood's valuable field notes from the Ethiopian authorities, we lack his expertise to interpret them and analyse them, so much will inevitably be lost of what promised to be a unique break-through in our understanding of the complexities of Afar social structure. Nor, if present indications are anything to go by, is the region likely to attract another foreign social anthropologist of Glynn Flood's stature in the foreseeable future. Perhaps we can only look to future Afar scholars to repair these losses and hope that they will still be able to observe and record the traditional pastoral life of their peoples.[2]

(*c*) *The Somali*

The progress of research here is surveyed in Lewis (1964 and 1967). The most important recent developments can, I think, be summarized as follows:

Enrica Cerulli's magnificent Somali trilogy (1957, 1959, 1964) not only collects his fundamental writings on many different aspects of Somali culture but also includes previously unpublished material on the Hawiye and southern Somali. On the social and political organisations of the latter, I have myself begun to publish the results of work carried out in the south, mainly in 1962 and 1964 (1965, 1966, 1969). This work has been consolidated and amplified by my colleague Virginia Luling's extended field-research among the Geledi at Afgooye (1966-1969). Dr. Luling's study (in press) describes how the Geledi confederation developed historically as a complex hierarchical structure consisting of a core of Geledi pastoral aristocrats, divided into two moieties who confront each other in the annual « stick-fight » (*istun*), with Arabized clients (the so-called « white-skins ») as religious specialists, and an ex-slave population of cultivators of part-Bantu origin.

The final element of this heterogeneous polity consists of the Wa'adan Somali pastoralists, with whom the Geledi are traditionally closely allied. This analysis of the economic and political history of the Somali tribe that was most powerful in southern Somalia in the late mineteenth century illustrates the capabilities of the Somali lineage system for state formation of the conquest type, and enables us to appreciate how this form of organization can

[2] The devastations of the 1973 famine, aggravated by the exploitative « development » of the Awash Valley, threaten to destroy the traditional pastoral culture (Flood 1975).

provide a bridge between the acephalous structure of the northern pastoralists and the more centralised polities of the Swahili coast.

Other recent contributions to Somali history (and ethno-history) have been made by L. V. Cassanelli, who worked in the south of Somalia in 1969-70, reconstructing the course of the Bimal revolt. R. L. Hess (1966) has produced a workmanlike account of Italian colonialism [3] in Somalia, based on documentary sources; and in the field of religion, B. G. Martin's (1969) scholary research on the intricate connections between *tariqa* leaders and their pupils significantly enhances our understanding of the role of Somali Islam in the wider East African Muslim setting.[4] A unique contribution comes from the pen of the self-taught Somali historian Shire Jaamac Cumar Ciise (cfr. Ciise 1974), whose admirably comprehensive and scholary compilation of the poetry of sayid Maxamad Cabdulle Xasan is a major cause for celebration. That veteran Somali scholar, Musa Galaal, has produced an important ethnographic work on traditional Somali astronomy and time-reckoning (1968). Dr. Husseyn M. Adam's account (1968) of the long, agonizing struggle to find an official orthography for Somali will, I hope, soon be published, while Dr. Omar Osman's analysis of the social impact of the new instant literacy in Somalia should appear shortly.[5]

These new works by Somali scholars mark an important leap forward in Somali studies. Our appreciation of these new developments must, however, be tempered by the sadness with which we record the death of that pioneer of modern Somali political studies, A. Castagno. His penetrating insights (e.g., 1964), warm personality, and sympathetic commitment to the Horn of Africa remain an inspiration to all who would follow in his footsteps.

(*d*) *The Rendille*

Paul Spencer (1973) has recently followed up his earlier account of the Nilo-Hamitic Samburu (1965) with an interesting description of their symbiotic relations with the Rendille. The latter

3 Patrick Kakwenzire (SOAS) is now conducting research on the British colonial period.

4 Mohamed Osman Abdel Halim, of the University of Khartoum, has recently completed a history thesis entitled *Islam in Somalia, 1800-1820*, based partly on research in Somalia.

5 For a recent and up-to-date survey of the national script problem see also D. D. Laitin, *Politics, Language and Thought: the Somali Experience*, Chicago U.P., Chicago 1977 [Ed.'s note].

are partly of Somali (particularly Tunni) origin and form a shifting cultural buffer between the Somali and the Nilo-Hamites. The patrilinear Rendille, who have a ritual moiety organization as well as age-sets, are essentially camel-herders (like their Somali kinsmen) and trade brides for rights in cattle with the Samburu. The latter acquire rights in Rendille camels and absorb impoverished Rendille. Thus a joint ethnic partnership develops in livestock herding, the 'Samburu' specializing in cattle and the 'Rendille' in camels, while sheep and goats are common to both ethnic groups.

(e) The Oromo

While one flexible ethnic frontier, associated with differences in pastoral economy, exists between Rendille (Somali) and Samburu, there is another much more extensive one *within* the Cushitic-speaking group, the one between Somali and Galla (ofr the northern Kenyan situation, see Baxter (1966). Paul Baxter's field-work among the Borana Galla of northern Kenya (1951-1953), the first modern social anthropological research among a Cushitic-speaking people, turned out to be the harbinger of a welcome surge of activity. The most comprehensive enterprise in the field is Eike Haberland's (1963) invaluable survey of the ethnography of the Borana, northern and southern Guji, Arussi and Shoan Galla. That this work partly shares an older European tradition, which draws parallels in order to establish origins and which does not hesitate to include detailed accounts of material culture and tchnology, increases rather than diminishes its value as a complement and corrective to the very different bias of the English-speaking tradition. In the earlier, German style of Ethiopian cultural and historical studies, Haberland emphasizes the dualist (moiety) theme in Oromo culture. In the same spirit, but rather paradoxically, he argues that the *gada* system is too complicated for the Galla to have invented it themselves (although they seem to work with it!). With greater cogency, Haberland demonstrates that the general trend of Galla tradition suggests that the original homeland was in the highlands of the south eastern Ethiopian plateaus. Of course, this view, which he is right to stress, is not necessarily incompatible with other evidence from Somalia suggesting that some Galla (evidently not all) occupied parts of what is now northern Somalia before their present (Somali) inhabitants did, as stated in Grottanelli's (1975) survey.

The next phase in the anthropological assault, this time in the British 'structural-functionalist' mould, is represented by Herbert

Lewis's (1965) succint analysis of the genesis of the Galla kingdom of Jimma, and by Virginia Luling's (1966) wider-ranging reconstruction of similar developments. These developments are part of a general process in which, as the basis of the economy shifted from pastoralism to cultivation and trade as the population expanded northward, the old republican *gada* order gave way to a more hierarchical system, which was partly modelled on the highly stratified Amhara state. A new class of socially mobile entrepreneurs emerged. They tried to control access to land and markets and to reinforce their new-found authority by dominating the supply of fire-arms, which in the turbulent late nineteenth century became increasingly decisive in the struggle for power between rival Galla leaders. Karl Knutsson's (1967) account of the religion of the Macha Galla shows how these politico-economic developments, with the rise of big-men competing for secular power, were paralleled by correlated changes in traditional Galla beliefs and religious institutions. In these unstable new conditions, achieved shamanistic positions, legitimized through divine possession by refractions of the sky-god (Waka) replaced the former attachment of the Macha to the divinely instituted high priests (*kallu*) of southern Borana tradition. As Herbert Lewis (1970) and Alice Morton (1972) show, these shamanistic *kallus* also play an important role in the settlement of disputes.

This transition from a priestly dynasty to shamanism, coinciding with the decline (although not complete eclipse) of the traditional *gada* system, was associated (at least in some regions in some periods) with an increased emphasis on bonds of clanship. Ultimately, however, since each clan and clan segment has its own spirit-inspired *kallu*, the new religious organization has come to include an ascribed as well as achieved emphasis, and there is some indication that the wheel may turn full-circle, with a reversion to something reminiscent of the old southern priestly dynasty of *kallus*. These developments provide much food for thought. They indicate, contrary to the assumptions made by Gamst for the Qemant, that a febrile shamanism associated with rapid social change can gradually solidify into a state priesthood in the old tradition. And this, of course, opens up a whole new series of questions about the possible origins of the traditional Borana *kallus* themselves. Other religious developments are equally significant and characteristic. Reflecting the Macha experience within the culturally and politically pluralistic Ethiopian setting, the Virgin Mary and the Prophet

Mohammed and a host of Christian and Muslim saints have been assimilated in the modern cult of Waka. In remarking this religious syncretism we again touch on the key issue of ethnic boundaries and cultural nationalism, to which we shall return later.

More recent research promises to complete our picture of how these and other processes work among the Oromo *as a whole*. Paul Baxter (in press) has now followed up his original research among the Borana with a major field-study among the Arusi, and his student Hector Blackhurst (1974) has analysed the structure of an immigrant Shoan Galla community among the Arusi. Meanwhile W. I. Torry (1973) has made an important ecological analysis of the Gabbra associates of the Boran, and a modest but valuable compilation of Gabbra social customs has been published by Father Paolo Tablino (1974). Mention should also be made of new contributions on the Wallega Galla on ritual, by Father L. Bartels (1970), and on history, by Alessandro Triulzi (in press), while the Guji have been studied by the American social anthropologist J. Hinant.

While awaiting full publication of the results of this recent work, Asmaron Legesse's monumental *gada*, published in 1973 after a long period of gestation, provides much food for thought for Galla specialists. This ambitious assault on the most characteristic institution of the Galla, the *gada* generation set system, confirms much of the interpretation hazarded over a decade ago in Legesse's highly original article (1963) on the subject and breaks new ground in establishing the precise fashion in which, among the Borana at any rate, the age and generation sets interlock. This new work confirms Baxter's emphasis on the significance of cross-cutting ties — based on moiety, clan, lineage, age, generation and locality attachments — as the key to understanding the impressive degree of integration achieved by the Borana Galla (cfr. Luling 1966).

Legesse's emphasis on the *gada* system's effects on birth control leads him to consider the institution as a device designed to counter excessive population growth. Indeed, he proposes the novel view that as a system for population control, *gada* probably developed at the time of the main Galla migrations in the sixteenth century, which have been traditionally connected with a population explosion in their original homeland. If this astonishing hypothesis is to be taken at all seriously, one can only say that had the Galla hit upon this striking innovation a bit sooner, they might never have had to expand beyond their original boundaries.

III

We must now summarize our brief and by no means exhaustive survey of recent contributions to Cushitic studies. As will be clear from the foregoing, the main thrust of modern work by social anthropologists is directed at that long neglected but supremely important people, the Galla, of whom in the next few years we should have a fairly comprehensive picture. The only remaining major gaps this will leave in the Galla jig-saw are the northern Wallo and Raya Galla of Wollo and Tigre provinces, and, to a lesser degree, the Harar Galla *(Kottu)*. When these have been studied, the resulting corpus of Galla ethnography will provide a unique laboratory for comparative research in north east Africa.

The publication of Virginia Luling's work in southern Somalia and Amon Orent's on Kafa will at last begin to redress our regrettable lack of up-to-date information on the more centralized Cushitic-speaking peoples. Further progress in this direction will require intensive research amongst those Sidamo groups who once formed part of the Sidamo states. Once all this has been done, will our Cushitic jigsaw puzzle be complete? In a narrow sense, I suppose, the answer must be « yes ». But, if the rich potential for comparative research is to be fully exploited, there are still other dimensions to consider. Some recent studies by social anthropologists are marred by too narrow a focus and by a lack of scholarship, which diminish the value and utility of the data collected. Such brazen naivété might be forgiven in the remote jungles of New Guinea (although not for much longer), but in such a richly documented region it is inexcusable to ignore the very important stock of information that has been accumulated by generations of travellers and scholars. Indeed, the most satisfactory and exciting comparative results can be achieved only by viewing the Cushitic data in the *widest* relevant frame of reference. nd this means taking full account of the centuries old and many-faceted interchange between the Cushitic and Semitic-speaking peoples of north east Africa. This is essential, for, as every informed student knows, the social and cultural phenomena of the region transcend these rather arbitrary linguistic boundaries. There is probably even a case for including other, more peripheral groups, such as the Mursi pastoralists of the Omo Valley, studied by David Turton (1973), and other neighboring peoples, like the Dassanetch, who have recently been studied by Uri Almagor (1971, 1972 (a) and 1972 (b)).

To point to the crucial relevance for the comparativist of the many shared beliefs and institutions and relationships that bridge linguistic gaps, and thus to stress the dynamic pluralism of this region, is not of course necessarily to revert to a naive diffusionism. Nor does it mean accepting the simplistic laundry-listing of shared culture-traits as a basis for integration, recently urged by D.N. Levine (1974). Rather, it is to acknowledge the facts of history and the direct evidence of the common cultural features (flowing back and forth within the fluid ethnic contours of the area) that confront us at every turn and in every period. Nowhere is this more strikingly demonstrated than in the continuing exchanges between Christianity, Islam, Judaism and the indigenous Cushitic religion, which have been responsible through the centuries for the rich diversity of syncretic cults that have flourished so abundantly. Christians and Muslims alike flock to the arnual (pagan) Galla sacrifice at Lake Bishoftu, and they join in pilgrimages to the shrine of St. Gabriel in Hararghe Province and to that of Shaikh Husseyn in Bali, whose cult is a unique synthesis of traditional Galla and Islamic elements. In the same ecumenical tradition and in the wake of these encounters between the official major religions, lesser spirits flit from people to people and region to region with gay alacrity.

As I have argued elsewhere (Lewis 1974), these exchanges — in which Christians are particularly vulnerable to pagan and Muslim spirit intrusions, and Muslims to harassment by Christian and pagan demons — are a crucial part of the continuing dialogue between the core Christian and Muslim cultures of northeast Africa.

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