

# Aethiopistische Forschungen

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Herausgegeben von  
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Band 58

2001

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

Harald Aspen

# Amhara Traditions of Knowledge

## Spirit Mediums and their Clients

2001

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

Titelvignette: Adelheid Kordes

Publication of this book was supported by a grant from *The Norwegian Universities' Committee for Development Research and Education (NUFU)*.

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme  
Ein Titeldatensatz für diese Publikation ist bei Der Deutschen Bibliothek erhältlich

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP Cataloguing-in-Publication-Data  
A catalogue record for this publication is available from Die Deutsche Bibliothek

e-mail: [cip@dbf.ddb.de](mailto:cip@dbf.ddb.de)

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Printed on permanent/durable paper.

Printing and binding by MZ-Verlagsdruckerei GmbH, Memmingen  
Printed in Germany

ISSN 0170-3196  
ISBN 3-447-04410-1

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## PREFACE

Social anthropologists deal with the faculty of fantasy and imagination in at least two ways: we study the social and cultural effects of it, and we use it ourselves in our academic speculation. In this book I make use of a case study of a spirit cult in Ethiopia to demonstrate how human creativity connects imagination and reality in the production of a reality which is individually imagined, but socially created (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The spirit cult epistemologies and practices appeal to imagination and creativity in individual participants, leaders and observers, while the social and historical context in which it is played out determine the cultural forms that emerge from these processes.

To deal with Ethiopian spirit cults and related phenomena as a social scientist is a challenge which calls for creativity and imagination, as well as empathy and patience. The variation in forms and practices between cults within small geographic areas opposes classification and typology, and the co-existence of seemingly incongruous beliefs and practices challenges pre-set ideas about the need for consistency and harmony in people's mental charts. All this testifies the human capacity of accommodating and adjusting variant flows of ideas and experiences, while the social anthropologist is left with the difficult question of how to make (anthropological) sense out of it. Anthropologists and other social scientists should be familiar with the problem of finding themselves confronted with the cacophonous impact of real life, and the challenge to make an intelligible analysis out of it, without doing violence to the evidence. In the current study, we are confronted with a bewildering variety of seemingly competing discourses and epistemologies that exist side by side and intertwined, where orthodox priests participate in animistic rituals for spirited trees (*adbar*) and spirit mediums scold members of religious brotherhoods (*mahbär*) for laxity in church matters, and where spirit cult assistants call prospective clients for seminars, unmistakably a replica of the Därg's means of communication with the peasantry. If the mind is tuned at coherence and comprehensive logic, such observations are not only frustrating (frustration comes later, when the observations are to be analysed), they are also category-crashing and very upsetting.

The present book is a revised version of my doctoral dissertation in social anthropology (Aspen 1994b). The changes are not many and they have not altered the basic argument of the original thesis. I have weeded out some errors from the original manuscript, and the presentation of the statistical material that forms the basis for the discussion in Chapter 7 has been reduced, mainly by omitting the many tables that were included in the original dissertation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the local leaders of Mafud and Gänät who have always received me as a welcome guest during my stays there. I thank all who live in Gänät for their friendliness and co-operation. In particular I thank my neighbours in Dahna, and Täräfä Aga and his daughter S'ehay, the late Zäwdé Wäldä-Selasé, Zärga Wäldä-Gabreél, Degafé Asäfa, and Abäbä Ashené.

The long process of data collection, for this and previous works, has involved several assistants, and I thank all of them for their services. Lulu Mekoriya, Berhanu Gebresadiq, Abäbä Zäwdé, At'eläw Zäwdé, Birqé Mäkäsha, Bilelign Wolde Tsadik, the late Abäbayehu Zärga, Mäsawäraq Haylä-Giyorgis, and Senait Bekele deserve particular mention for their contributions.

Among the other PPDE assistants, I thank particularly Addisu Asmare and Berhanu Bete. My permanent assistant during the fieldworks, the late Lemma W/Ab, was my tour companion, Amharic teacher, translator, and cultural consultant, and we shared the tent, and later the cottage, and whatever else we had during the long fieldworks. Most importantly, we shared a warm and affectionate friendship that grew out of our common encounters with the hardships of fieldwork. Lemma also developed his skill so that he could work in the field in my absence, a task that he fulfilled exemplarily. When we had office work, his mother and sister opened their house for us in Däbrä Sina, and I am very grateful for the hospitality and care they rendered me whenever I was there.

I am also indebted to academic and administrative staff at Addis Ababa University. I thank Abdulhamid B. Kello, Andargachew Tesfaye, Daniel Gamachu, Dessalegn Rahmato, Elleni Haddis Assefa, Fekade Azeze, Makonnen Bishaw, Setargew Kenaw, Tatek Samare Zarou, Tegegne Teka, Teshome Mulat, and Yeshareg Berhane for their various contributions.

In Norway, the following have contributed to the study as critical readers and stimulating discussion partners: Eduardo Archetti, Odd Arnesen (who has also produced the map in this volume), Bodil and Jan Brøgger, Carla Dahl-Jørgensen, Svein Ege, Bjørn Erring, Signe Howell, Anne Kathrine Larsen, Tord Larsen, and Solrun Williksen.

Elaine Almén did a great work in proof-reading the original manuscript. Ingvild Lien assisted me with the formatting of the present manuscript.

Professor Siegbert Uhlig, editor of the *Aetiopistische Forschungen* series, has been generous to accept this work for publication and patient enough to give me the necessary time to complete the work.

The following sources have provided financial support for the project: The Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs (the SSE programme), the Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities (NAVF), the College of Arts and Sciences and the Faculty of History and Philosophy of the University of Trondheim, and the Norwegian Universities' Committee for Development Research and Education (NUFU).