

A Note on Religious Activities of Some Sheikhs in Negelle, Borana Region of Southern Ethiopia⁽¹⁾

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Sheikh" is an honorific title used to address a learned Muslim who has devoted some time in his life to learning the doctrine and the religion of Islam. He is not necessarily a man who spends most of his time reading or meditating. He may be a tailor, a merchant or even a peasant. Only a very limited number of people actually earn their living by religious activities, and here I discuss only those who make a living by teaching the Qur'an, elementary Arabic or by curing the sick. Some of them have attracted a large number of clients and disciples, while others have failed to do so.

The Muslims in Negelle are not a majority. Negelle, originally established in the 1910s as a military outpost for the expanding northern Christian empire, is inhabited mainly by merchants, officers and soldiers who migrated with their families from the northern highlands.⁽²⁾ Officers, soldiers and bar owners migrating from the north are mainly Christians, and merchants are mostly Muslims. Muslims account for approximately 35 percent of the town's population, which consists Somali, Arusi Oromo, Guji, Boran and Gurage. The pastoralists who inhabit the surrounding villages are mostly Somali and Islamized Boran and Guji pastoralists. They play an important part in the economic activities of the town, providing the townspeople with dairy products, meat and various goods smuggled from Kenya and Somalia.

The sheikhs are also migrants travelling from one place to another. Lacking institutionalized training centers, the Muslims acquire knowledge from individual sheikhs. Most of the sheikhs are attached to one of the *tariqas* (Islamic mystical orders). After finishing the necessary training, they are often sent to another place to teach on their own. On this occasion, the *murid* (disciple) receives *ijaza* (permission to practice the order's rituals) from his own sheikh. This *ijaza* is sometimes symbolized by an *imama* (turban) or a *dula* (walking stick) presented by the sheikh to the *murid*. Sheikhs frequently make a *ziyara* (pilgrimage) to a *darih* (mausoleum) of a famous sheikh. This often ends in settlement near the *darih*. The *ziyara* and the settlement are motivated by an *ishara* (order from a famous sheikh or Allah himself) pronounced in their sleep. As such, the lives and migrations of the sheikhs are commonly expressed in religious terms by their own sons or *murids*, but the religious activities and social interactions of the living sheikhs suggest rather secular considerations.

The following discussion is anthropological, focusing on the religious activities and social relationships of the major sheikhs in Negelle. Most of the prominent sheikhs that have migrated to Negelle are dead and their life histories were narrated by their sons or *murids*.

2. THE LIVES AND EDUCATIONAL CAREERS OF THE SHEIKHS IN NEGELLE

The life histories of the sheikhs described by the people are filled with descriptions of how they acquired knowledge and how they managed to extend their realm of influence by teaching and preaching. In Negelle, where most Muslims are Somali peoples, Somali influence is apparent in the branches of *tariqas*.

2. 1 The two branches of the Qadiriya order introduced into Negelle in the 1940s

There are two branches of the Qadiriya⁽³⁾ in Negelle. In one branch, the teaching was transmitted through Sheikh 'Abdurrahman Zaila'i (d.1881); and in the other, it was transmitted through Sheikh Uways Muhammad (d.1909).⁽⁴⁾ The former branch played a prominent role in northern Somalia in the second half of the 19th century, and the latter spread rapidly and was politically active in southern Somalia. Both branches were introduced into Negelle in the mid-1940s after the Italians were expelled, and both were politically neutral.

The former, the Zaila'i branch of Qadiriya, was introduced into Negelle by Sheikh Mahmud, who died two years after his arrival in 1946 and who shares a mausoleum with his successor, Sheikh Hassan, who died in around 1985. Sheikh Hassan passed on his leadership to Sheikh Ibrahim Gedi, who is still in his 30s. The mausoleum, built in 1987, has become one of the pilgrimage centers in the town.

The Uwaysiya branch of Qadiriya was introduced into the town by Sherif Tahir, who died in Moyale (a town 200 km south of Negelle) in 1985. The Uwaysiya *hadra* (a meeting where certain mystical phrases are chanted repeatedly, sometimes in time to a drum) was very popular in Sherif Tahir's days, but his death and the succession to his place by his eldest son, Sheikh Abdurrahman, who moved out to Bure (a small town in Bale Region) soon after his appointment, has led to a decline in popularity of the Uwaysiya in the town. Without a formal successor (*khalifa*) appointed in Negelle, and without any mausoleum or public facility such as a mosque or *madrasa* (school), the activities of the Uwaysiya have been reduced to mere family gatherings.

Sheikh Mahmud, a Sheikhal (a Somali clan to which many sheikhs belong), was born in Kebri Dehar in the Harar area. Finishing his elementary training in the Qur'an, he began teaching in Berbera, Somalia. There, he is believed to have met the famous Sheikh Uways, who started the Uwaysiya branch of Qadiriya, just after he had come back from Baghdad in 1881. After this, Sheikh Mahmud traveled around Jijiga and Harar, and during this period he received lessons on *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an), *fiqh* (interpretation and application of Shari'a), and *nahw* (Arabic grammar) from 45 sheikhs. He affiliated himself with Sheikh Abdussamad of Jijiga, one who had been a direct *murid* of Sheikh 'Abdurrahman Zaila'i, from whom he received the *ijaza* of the Zaila'i branch of Qadiriya.

Sheikh Hassan was also a Sheikhal, born in Funyan Bira near Harar. According to a legend, Sheikh Mahmud happened to be passing by just when Hassan was born, foresaw that Hassan would grow up to be his *khalifa*, and blessed him with *tahlil* (either by chanting the conventional phrase "there is no god but Allah," or with water that has been blessed using this phrase). Hassan was an excellent student, finishing his Qur'anic training at the age of ten, and he followed sheikh after sheikh, moving around Balbaletti and Jijiga, in order to increase his knowledge. At the age of 18, Hassan started teaching as many as 300 students in a small village near Harar.

When Sheikh Hassan was 18 years old, he went to Jijiga to visit the tomb of Sheikh Abdussamad, from whom Sheikh Mahmud received *ijaza* of the Qadiriya order. At Sheikh Abdussamad's mausoleum, Sheikh Hassan and the friends accompanying him were "captured" by Sheikh Mahmud. Sheikh Mahmud gave them *ijaza* and sent Sheikh Hassan's friends respectively to Somalia, Jibuti and Yemen. Sheikh Mahmud took only Sheikh Hassan with him and moved to Dire Dawa. When Sheikh Mahmud opened a *hadra* at Awash Sabat Kilo, he married Sheikh Hassan to his distant relative Mariam and put Sheikh Hassan in charge of the *hadra* there. At that time Sheikh Hassan was 28 years old.

In A.H. 1362 (1943), Sheikh Muhammad Feitan (the most important informant living in Negelle and one of the few contemporaries of Sheikh Mahmud still alive), at that time a merchant, met Sheikh Mahmud at the biggest mosque (Nur Mosque) in Addis Ababa. Sheikh Mahmud gave Sheikh Muhammad Feitan a book on the *salawat* (prayer) and told him to go to Awasa (Sidamo) to study for three years. When Sheikh Muhammad Feitan visited Awash to greet Sheikh Mahmud, the latter was invited to visit Afarland,⁽⁵⁾ and thus he accompanied a party which included two other sheikhs. The Afar welcomed them and presented them with 20 sheep. After this event, Sheikh Mahmud and Sheikh Muhammad Feitan moved to Mechara, and after spending about half a year there, Sheikh Mahmud moved again to Melka Jilo, where he saw an *ishara* in his sleep ordering him to go to the land of Borana Gutu.⁽⁶⁾ They entered Negelle on 17th of Jumada ath-thani (Friday), A.H. 1365 (1946). On entering the town, they were greeted by Somalis and Arabs, and were invited to the house of Sherif Yohannes Abdo, an official working at the municipality whose father they knew.

Because Sheikh Mahmud was quite well-known, many Muslims gathered around him from all over the country. Sheikh Mahmud had about 100 *murids* in the Jijiga and Harar areas. In Negelle, hearing of his reputation, about 90 people gathered around him to become his *murid*. Half of them consisted of Hawiya, and the rest were Ogaden, Idora, Gurra, Arusi, and Kotto Harar (Harar Oromo). He opened a *hadra* in the town and led the *murids*, but about a year after his arrival, he fell sick. Sheikh Hassan, who at that time had opened a *hadra* in Awasa, was sent for and appointed leader in succession to Mahmud. Transferring his own *hadra* in Awasa to another sheikh, Sheikh Hassan moved into Negelle.

Sheikh Ibrahim Gedi was studying the Qur'an in 1971-72, when Sheikh Hassan first discovered him at the age of 15. Sheikh Hassan appointed this bright boy his *khadim* (servant) and Ibrahim left his house to live with the sheikh, giving him daily help and at the same time acquiring knowledge from him. There were 12 other *khadims* like him, but he was the only one that devoted his time entirely to serving the sheikh, without taking other jobs, without getting married, and living and sleeping at the sheikh's house. This is why he was chosen to become the successor of the sheikh. Some duties are required of a successor: writing in Arabic the hagiography of the previous sheikh, leading the *hadra* dedicated to the previous sheikh and the founder of the *tariqa*, maintaining the mausoleum and preparing for the events held there. However, as Sheikh Ibrahim Gedi is still in his 30s, there are some *murids* of the last sheikh who haven't recognised him as the successor to his great predecessor. The *murids* of Sheikh Mahmud, four of whom are still living in Negelle, still identify themselves as *murids* of Sheikh Mahmud even though 45 years have passed since his death, and even though those living in Negelle then became *murids* of Sheikh Hassan. Sheikh Ibrahim Gedi and other followers and *murids* of the two sheikhs spend their leisure time in the Kubbi, reading, praying or chatting to each other, while chewing *chat*.⁽⁷⁾

The place known as Kubbi was the oldest graveyard built exclusively for Muslims. Now, dead laymen are buried in a new graveyard next to the old one and the Kubbi is reserved as a place of ritual for the followers of Sheikh Mahmud and Sheikh Hassan. The mausoleum of the two sheikhs was built in the Kubbi in 1987, two years after the death of Sheikh Hassan. Inside the Kubbi, enclosed by a grove of trees and bushes, there is also a large *hadra bet* (a hut where *hadra* is held), nowadays only used on ceremonial occasions or as a shelter for pilgrims and disciples. The mausoleum is frequented by pilgrims from Somalia and from Harar, and even Christians come to ask for some remedy for their own problems or diseases, especially on ceremonial occasions (*Mi'raj*, *Mawlid*, Sheikh Mahmud's day, Sheikh Hassan's day, Sheikh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani's day)⁽⁸⁾ when a big public *hadra* takes place in the Kubbi *hadra bet*. When Sheikh Hassan was popular, a large number of people used to gather, and even the *hadras* held weekly on Tuesday and Thursday evenings were usually held in this main *hadra bet*. But after the death of Sheikh Hassan, attendance at the *hadra* decreased and nowadays the weekly *hadra* is held at Sheikh Hassan's window's house.

The realm of influence of the great sheikhs (Sheikh Mahmud and Sheikh Hassan) is not limited to townspeople. The Muslim pastoralists also join the ceremonial events held in the

Kubbi, or they contribute their camels for sacrificial purposes. The *murids* and *khadims* are assigned the job of collecting *ziyara* (in this context meaning donations of cattle, camels or money given for pilgrimages) from the pastoralists living in the surrounding villages.

Sherif Tahir, born at Beidawa, Southern Somalia, received his elementary training in the Qur'an and elementary Arabic from his father, who also was a teacher. When he was 15, he went to Bardeer and received *ijaza* from Sheikh Muhammad Abgalo, who had been a *murid* under Sheikh Uways. Returning to his home village of Gofgaloole, he began teaching the Qur'an. There, he saw an *ishara* in his sleep that ordered him to go to Abashaland, and he moved into Ethiopia through Ogaden and on to Elkare in the Bale region, where he married his first wife. He then traveled around Bale, teaching and spreading the *Kara rabbi* (the way of God) to the Guji, Gurra, Arusi and Somali groups. Sherif Tahir met Sheikh Mahmud at Addis Ababa and was told to go to Negelle before him. Thus, around 1945, Sherif Tahir reached Negelle and opened a Uwaysiya *hadra*. However, he did not open a school or start teaching. One of the people who remembers the entry of the sheikhs told me that soon after Sheikh Mahmud entered Negelle, people around Sherif Tahir left him to join the *hadra* of the more famous sheikh.

Sherif Tahir left 22 children who were all counted as *murids*. The eldest son, Sherif Abdurrahman, was assigned to be his successor, but he moved off to Bure in the Bale region "because the town had no *madrassa* there." He told me he would come back only when he passed the "*fatana* (examination)." The *hadra* in Negelle is run by the remaining children, who are not skilled enough to lead it. There is a Somali *chirchari* (commission merchant) living in Negelle who is much skilled in the Uwaysiya *dhikr* (incessant repetition of certain formulas in praise of certain saints or Allah), but he is regarded with disdain by the sheriif's family and reproached for his intrusion on their rights.

2. 2 The immigration of a Huseiniya follower to Negelle in the 1960s

In urban areas of southern Ethiopia, the roaming "*Gariba*" (literally, stranger) is a common scene. Wrapped in rags, carrying Y-shaped walking sticks and wearing long and big-beaded *tusba* (beads counted when praying or chanting) around their necks, they flock together in marketplaces singing the song dedicated to Sheikh Hussen. They are adherents and followers of this revered 13th century Ethiopian saint.⁽⁹⁾

The mausoleum built in the Negesso district of Negelle is that of Hajj Abdulqadir, a grandson of Hajj Ali Wali. Hajj Ali Wali, a devoted follower of Sheikh Hussen, was a Sheikhal born in the Harar area. According to my informant, the younger son of Hajj Abdulqadir, this great grandfather of his was as "sharp as a knife" and lived an ascetic life. Even when he lay down to sleep, he tied a pair of horns of a goat onto his pillow to keep himself uncomfortable. When someone disturbed him while he prayed or chanted the *dhikr*, it is said that he would kill them by shouting the words, "Allah Akbar" (Allah, the greatest). In this way, the Hajj caused so much trouble that even the great Sheikh Hussen appeared in his sleep and told him not to come to Anajina, his home. Hajj Ali Wali devised his own way of communicating with Sheikh Hussen and Allah, which he transmitted to his sons.

Of his 12 children, the eldest son, Sayyid Abdullahi became his successor. Though Sayyid Abdullahi was inferior to his father in performing *karama* (miracles) he was superior to him in *'ilm* (knowledge). Therefore, his father told him to engage in public debate, which he himself had never done. The third son of the Sayyid was Abdulqadir. He was a very strong man and, owing to his ability to communicate with *jinn* (spirits), he carried around many weapons to protect himself and to heal the spirit-possessed. For this reason, he was even mistaken for a *shifta* (bandit) and thrown into jail (bandits had been politically active in the 1960s in this region), but he was later given permission to carry his weapons, which included four knives, a pistol and a Y-shaped walking stick. (I was told that the unlucky policeman who had arrested him suffered leprosy after that.) He came to Negelle around 1965. Before this, he lived in Bidre in Bale Region. The 1960s in Bale was a period when the Muslim Arusi represented by Wako Gutu started a rebellion against the Christian Amhara Government. Bidre was situated right in the middle of the fighting parties, and was

attacked by both sides. The informant told me several episodes in which his father protected the residents, turning bullets into water, changing the weekly market day before an attack, foreseeing air raids, and so on.

Sheikh Abdulqadir had met Sheikh Mahmud in Negelle before, and was advised to live there, where he was presented with a girl, the daughter of the landowner in Negesso. He held sessions for spirit-possessed patients, and held a weekly *hadra* with the *dhikr* transmitted from his grandfather. He died around 1970. His mausoleum still attracts pilgrims on ceremonial occasions. However, the eldest son and successor of the Sheikh, Sheikh Abdulwali, nowadays seldom stays in town. He has become fairly rich through trading activities and returns to Negelle only on ceremonial occasions.

2. 3 The influence and ambitions of Sherif Badru

The death of the main sheikhs in Negelle (Sheikh Mahmud, Sheikh Hassan, Sherif Tahir, Sheikh Abdulqadir) marked a change of generation. The great sheikhs of the second generation have begun to develop their own spheres of influence.⁽¹⁰⁾

Sherif Badru was born in Harar to a rich Adare family, received elementary Islamic education in Harar, and also graduated from the government secular high school. He had not thought of becoming a sheikh until a strange event in Harar.⁽¹¹⁾ After this event, he began travelling about acquiring knowledge from several sheikhs in Harar and around Addis Ababa. He did not affiliate himself with a *tariqa* but acquired mystical knowledge from three sheikhs. In Harar, Sheikh Umar taught him *tufta* (a way to heal the spirit-possessed using water) and other healing methods. In Nazareth (a town 100 km south of Addis Ababa), he attended the *hadra* of Sheikh Hassan bin Mashmush, a sheikh of the Mirghaniya order.⁽¹²⁾ At this *hadra*, Sherif Badru met Sheikh Ahmad. Sheikh Ahmad had been teaching the Qur'an in Negelle. He had been searching for "a *wali* (saint) worth giving his daughter as a wife." Having been given the daughter of the Somali sheikh, Sherif Badru moved into Negelle around 1978. He had been making his living as a tailor, and it was not until 1985 when he cured a dying girl that he started a healing service. He opened a *madrasa* only recently, in 1989, but his reputation for learning and spiritual power has enabled him to attract clients in a short period. He even started giving Qur'anic lessons to unmarried teenage girls and built a section inside the mosque for adult women and girls to join the prayers, an innovation no other sheikh had ever introduced.

Sherif Badru explained to me how good his relationships had been with the late Sheikh Hassan and Sherif Tahir, and how the sheikhs had expressed confidence in him. However, his ability in establishing and expanding the *madrasa* and mosque and his popularity among the townspeople evoked much jealousy among the second-generation sheikhs (Sheikh Abdulwali and Sherif Abdurrahman). This popularity has compensated for his precarious status as a sheikh without an appointed place for a *tariqa*. Moreover, it seems that he is attempting to open a new branch of *tariqa*, considering himself a *wali*. On Tuesday and Thursday evenings, he opens a *hadra* using the *dhikr* which he made himself.

Sherif Badru is extending his sphere of influence not only among the townspeople but also among the Somali and Oromo pastoralists living in the surrounding villages. He occasionally visits the villages to bless the people and the wells, praying for abundant rain, health and peace at each village. During my stay in Negelle, he was planning to apply to the orphan salvation campaign sponsored by the International Islamic Relief.⁽¹³⁾ In the surrounding pastoralist villages, there are quite a few orphans, owing to the incessant intergroup skirmishes. If he succeeds in this project, he will secure a broad base of clients in the Muslim pastoralist villages.

3. CONCLUSION

A brief summary can be made at this point about the general tendencies in the religious activities and migrations of the sheikhs in Negelle.

First, the first-generation sheikhs settled in Negelle after long journeys of preaching and learning. Although the practical reasons for settlement in and departure from Negelle may

be marriage, purchase or inheritance of land, or the potential to expand a sphere of influence, the migration of the sheikhs is given religious meaning and is marked by the establishment of new public religious facilities. The sheikhs are frequently ordered in *isharas* to go to areas where Islam is not a dominant religion (such as the southern regions adjacent to lands of pagan groups). The sheikhs affiliated to *tariqas* are given *ijaza* to spread their faith and open *hadras*, *madrasas* and mosques in the communities they settled in. After their deaths *darihs* are built, which become sacred places where *ziyaras* are made.

Secondly, if this religious motivation is the dynamic of the migration of sheikhs, then what will happen to the second-generation sheikhs, assigned to be *khalifas*? Will they follow their fathers' way of life and migrate, or will they feel content with what their fathers have left for them and remain? The answer seems to be the first of these. For none of the second-generation sheikhs who have the financial ability and ambition have remained in Negelle.

Thirdly, what will become of the religious situation in Negelle? One answer is given by the example of Sherif Badru. There may be a continual flow of sheikhs from areas where Islam is the dominant religion (such as Harar and Somalia). Even now, many sheikhs are coming to greet Sheikh Mahmud through *isharas* from Harar and, in response to my question, answered that they will settle in Negelle if the Sheikh orders them to do so.

Similar migrations of religious leaders are reported from other Muslim societies, past and present.⁽¹⁴⁾ Why the religious leaders tend to migrate and why they settle at a certain period in their lives are related both to the social and historical conditions and to the general question of production and reproductions of charisma. The material presented in this report are not enough to substantiate these points and further investigation is required.

NOTES

- (1) I am grateful especially to Dr. Shun Sato of Tsukuba University and the Japanese research members of the project entitled *Comparative Studies on Agricultural and Pastoral Societies in Northeast Africa*. I am also indebted to the Ethiopian staff of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University for their assistance to me during my research from September 1990 to March 1991.
- (2) The latest census (1990–91) gives the following figures.
 Amhara: 8,839 (51 percent); including Gurage, Tiger.
 Oromo: 4,815 (28 percent); including Boran, Guji, Arusi, Worji, Shoan Oromo.
 Somali: 3,267 (19 percent); including Degodiya, Marrehan, Garri, Gurra, Gabra, Wararsame.
 Others: 275 (1.5 percent); including Konso, Burji, Sidama, Walaita, Kambata.
 Total: 17,200 (male: 8,011, female: 9,185).
 I owe thanks to Ato Hussein Ali of the municipality of Negelle for generously showing me the most recent census data.
- (3) The Qadiriya is an Islamic mystical order established in Baghdad by 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (1077–1166). The order extended its realm of influence from West Africa to India.
- (4) The history of the two Sheikhs is mentioned in Martin (1969).
- (5) The Afar is a camel-pastoralist group living in northeastern Ethiopia and Jibuti.
- (6) The Boran is a cattle-pastoralist group living in the western Borana Region. Boran is one of the few Oromo groups still adhering to their traditional pagan religion, resisting conversion either to Christianity or to Islam. *Gutu* is a small tuft of hair braided on top of the head of men who have fathered a son or killed an enemy, symbolizing masculinity and "Boranness."
- (7) *Chat* (*Catha edulis*) is a small shrub grown in Ethiopia and adjacent African and Arabian countries. It is chewed primarily for its stimulating effect, especially on ritual occasions (Hill 1965).
- (8) *Mi'raj* is a Muslim holiday celebrating Mohammed's ascension to the seven heavens. *Mawlid* is a holiday celebrating the Prophet's birthday. The other three days are celebrated in memory of the death of the three saints.
- (9) It is debatable whether Sheikh Hussen was a real saint living in the 13th century (Braukamper 1989).
- (10) Sheikh Ibrahim Gedi is exceptional because of his precarious status as an immature *khalifa*.

- (11) This event occurred when Sherif Badru had been working as a tailor in a small shop in Harar. A madman suddenly appeared at his workshop and foretold that he would become a sheikh. Sherif Badru discovered his own spiritual power after this event.
- (12) The Mirghaniya is a *tariqa* established by Muhammad 'Uthman al-Mirghani (1793-1852). The main region influenced is Sudan and Eritrea (Trimmingham 1952).
- (13) International Islamic Relief is an aid organization affiliated to the Muslim World League. The Relief began its activities in Ethiopia in 1990. Its main activities are concentrated on the construction of orphanages, clinics and schools. The orphan salvation campaign is intended to give pensions to Muslim orphans and also to build orphanages for them.
- (14) Trimmingham 1968.

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