

Constructing a New Imagined Space: Idioms of Alien Cultures in the *Ayana* Possession Cults of the Hor in South Omo

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This paper explores how new possession cults in an agro-pastoral society have appropriated idioms from alien cultures and constructed a new identity based on a geographical image of state rule that had been repressed by their traditional ideology. The Hor is an agro-pastoralist group residing in the South Omo Zone. During the 1960s, the *ayana* possession cult, originating in Borana, was introduced to the Hor and spread rapidly. Despite oppression during the Derg regime, this cult has steadily expanded its sphere of influence. Notable features of *ayana* cults include: 1) their adoption of the cultural idioms of Ethiopian highlanders in rituals, even though these are considered as abhorrent according to *aada* (tradition), and 2) the fact that their membership consists of more than 80% women.

Although the cult has its own social organization constructed with idioms appropriated from the age system of the Hor, it violates such Hor patriarchal systems as lineage, clan, territorial group, and age. By holding séances, rituals, and divinations, influential female mediums and their followers can cross these traditional social boundaries. In the past, spirit possession had been interpreted as possession by ancestral spirits and treated with rituals intended to soothe ancestors, thus consolidating the patriarchy. However, most *ayana* spirits are reported to come from outside the Hor people. Indeed, reports of spirits of the Amhara (Sidaama) and of white men (Farenji) have been increasing recently. Thus, the *ayana* possession cult has offered an alternative interpretation of possession by introducing alien spirits and has restructured the imagined space that represents the foundation of the Hor patriarchy.

These features are closely intertwined and give followers the basis for resisting tradition. The cult provides not only a social space in which they are liberated from patriarchal rule, but also a symbolic space in which they can imagine the vast world outside of the patriarchal community.

Key words: Southwestern Ethiopia, Arbore, Hor, *ayana*, spirit possession, resistance, space

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the organization and symbolism of the spirit possession cults followed by the Hor in South Omo. *Ayana* possession cults came to the Hor from the Borana, the neighboring pastoral group to the east, in the 1960s and spread rapidly among the Hor.

Spirit possession has long drawn attention from anthropologists. Ioan Myrddin Lewis, for example, pointed out that this practice provides an outlet for social conflicts. He considers the spirit mediums to be socially marginalized individuals who profit economically, in ways not available to them otherwise, by expressing their wishes through the utterances of spirits. These spirits usually demonstrate ethically marginal characteristics attributed to outside groups that do not conform to

the social norms held by the society to which the possessed belong. The amorality attributed to such groups renders the sentiments expressed by the spirits permissible insofar as they are not attributed to the possessed (Lewis 1971). Other studies have noted the relationship between spirit possession and the construction of gender identity. Discussing a Sudanese possession cult, Janice Boddy argued that spirit possession gives women who suffer from infertility not only the means to resist the rule of their husbands, but also the opportunity to defend their female identity by ascribing their infertility to the actions of possessing spirits (Boddy 1989). Recently, some scholars have attended to mimetic aspects of possession. Paul Stoller pointed out that Hauka spirit possession in Niger embodies colonial memories and represents the integration of the power of colonizers (Stoller 1995).

Drawing on these insights, I focus on both the social and symbolic dimensions of the *ayana* possession cult and demonstrate that this cult enables the marginalized individuals of the Hor not only to profit economically, but also to establish a social network with which to protect their freedom to pursue non-traditional activities. I also show that the cult enables followers to claim a new identity that mediates between their traditions and the culture of powerful outsiders, and that transcends the traditional imagined space in which patriarchal rule is established. First, I introduce the social background of the Hor and show that their patriarchal system is based on a spatial scheme that distinguishes the inside from the outside. Second, I describe the organization characterizing the *ayana* possession cult. Third, I demonstrate how the traditional interpretation of spirit possession has been appropriated and changed in the rituals of the *ayana* possession cult, and how the symbols of the cult are associated with the memory of Ethiopian state rule. Finally, examining the process of cult formation, I suggest that the *ayana* possession cult spread widely because it enabled the marginalized to trespass across the limits constraining the imagined space of tradition and to create a new identity by integrating symbols deriving from indigenous traditions and powerful state rule.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Social Organization of the Hor

The Hor are Cushitic agro-pastoralists with a population of approximately 4,000. They subsist on flood-retreat cultivation along the Weito River and on livestock-herding in the savanna grassland. The Hor are divided into four territorial sections. The northern two territorial sections (Gandarab and Kulam) refer to themselves as Arbore, and the southern two territorial sections (Murale and Egude) refer to themselves as Marle.

Each territorial section has its own chiefs and age organization. The *k'awot* is the pre-eminent chief, who has the power of blessing and curse. The *kernet* is a subsidiary chief who mediates between the *k'awot* and the elders. *Jaldaabs* are elders who are appointed from within the dominant generation cohort in the age organization. They support the *k'awot* and *kernet* and preside over their territorial section. The Hor consider the *k'awots* of the Gandarab and of the Kulam to have stronger power than the *k'awots* of the Marle. The Gandarab *k'awot* is reputed to control rain and harvest, and the Kulam *k'awot* is reputed to control the fertility of livestock. People of the Hor, including the Marle, rely on the power of the *k'awots* of the Arbore for good harvests and for proliferation of their livestock.

For the Hor, the *k'awot* serves as the symbol of ethnic identity and integration. Since the conquest of the Ethiopian Empire in 1897, the Hor have suffered from relentless governance by the state. They have survived by constructing and maintaining their tradition (*aada*) (see 4.3). *K'awots* have been the nexus of this tradition, and the Hor have tried to isolate *k'awots* from the political affairs of the state (Miyawaki 2006).

The Hor tradition is based on patriarchy. Domination by the elders is justified by their role in controlling the ambiguous power wielded by the *k'awot*. The legend of the *k'awot* of Gandarab elucidates this process. In Gandarab, the *k'awot* is said to have been an alien who came from the outside. He had the power to curse and to control rain, and he subjugated the indigenous chief and inhabitants. The indigenous chief became the *kernet*. Next, the stranger chief monopolized the women, the ivory,

and the flood plain, but the indigenous chief retaliated and finally succeeded in demoting the stranger chief to the intermediary position of using rituals to induce the gods to grant fertility.

K'awots are treated as if they are women and are strictly prohibited from gaining access to weapons. They are supported by the *kernet* and *jaldaabs*, who are appointed from indigenous clans. Thus, the *k'awot* symbolizes not only ethnic integration, but also ambivalent alien power that had been malevolent in the past but has been domesticated and transformed into the power of blessing. The patriarchal tradition of the Hor is constructed according to a spatial scheme in which the power of the outside is incorporated into the inside.

I refer to this spatial scheme as the imagined space of tradition. In the imagined space of tradition, the roles of community members are prescribed by age and sex. Geographical space is classified into such value-laden categories as inside and outside, and members are expected to act in accord with their roles. Geographical space and social norms are thus intertwined in the imagined space of tradition.

2.2. Inter-ethnic Relationships, Patriarchy, and the Imagined Space of Tradition

Inter-ethnic relationships with neighboring groups reiterate this spatial scheme. Neighbors of the Hor include the Hamar to the West, the Waata and Borana to the East, and the Tsamako to the North (Fig. 1). The Hor consider it good to kill some neighboring groups and bad to kill others (Tadesse 1997). The Maale, Omotic agriculturalists who live in the northern mountainous area, and the Kore (Samburu), Nilotic pastoralists who live in Kenya, are said to be fatal enemies of the Hor. The Hor say that if one of them kills these enemies, the enemy's blood will bring the killer fertility in the proliferation of his cattle, the growth of his crops, and the fecundity of his wife. The Borana are also considered as having "sweet" blood. In contrast, neighboring groups such as the Hamar, Waata, and Tsamako are believed to have "bitter" blood. If the Hor kill members of these groups, their blood will cause their crops to wither and their cattle and wives to become sterile. The Hor regard marriage to women from those enemy groups believed to have sweet blood to be preferable. These

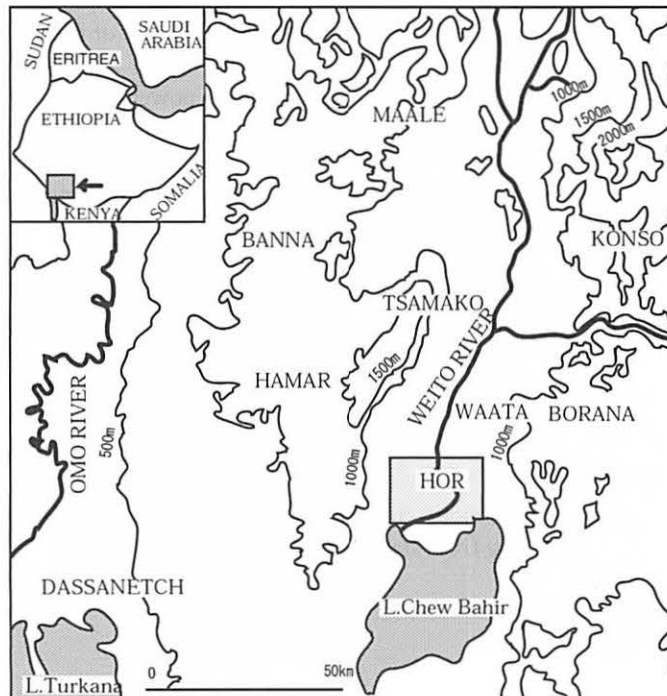


Fig. 1. The Hor and their Neighbors

women, once married, are said to bear many children. In addition, it is generally understood that those enemies whose blood is sweet to the Hor also consider the blood of the Hor to be sweet, and therefore these desires are mutual.

The killing of enemies marks the first step in a series of ritual actions. After a warrior kills an enemy, his close friend must sever the genitalia of the dead. The killer has to “buy” the genitalia in exchange for a calf and wears a costume displaying his status as a killer. After the severed genitalia are hung from an acacia tree outside of his settlement, the killer, the friend, and the acacia tree, which symbolizes the dead enemy, enter into a taboo relationship known as *agas*. Those who became *agas* must not hurt one another, and their lineages must not inter-marry. They must also salute the acacia tree when they are near it, but resting under the tree represents a taboo for them.

The fertility of the enemy’s blood can be “bought” by a third person through a ritual called *mee fak’in*. The one who wants to become a “killer” proposes to buy the “genitalia” from the killer. During the night, the killer and his *agas* friend, each armed with a spear, visit the house of the prospective buyer. The purchaser waits with his friend and they pretend to fight with each other when the killer and his *agas* friend arrive. This fighting ends with the purchaser defeating the killer, and the purchaser removing a piece of wood that symbolizes the severed genitalia of the killer. The purchaser then gives a calf to the killer, and the purchaser, his friend, and the killer enter into a relationship of *agas*. This ritual demonstrates the domestication of the violent power emanating from the outside.

The transformation and domestication of the power of enemies are completed by the ritual performed by the *k’awot*. A *k’awot* is considered perfect only when he becomes a “killer,” but because the Hor consider the *k’awot* as equivalent to a woman and as the symbol of peace and fertility, the *k’awot* cannot participate in warfare. Thus, the *k’awot* needs to perform the *mee fak’in* ritual to become a “killer.” The killing of enemies by “commoner” warriors’ providing the genitalia of the deceased is necessary to increase the power of the *k’awot*.

We should note that the ambiguity of the *k’awot* is reflected in the image of enemies. The Hor believe that the power of the *k’awot* is not only benevolent, but also dangerous. His curse is believed to represent a fatal weapon against enemies and to result in disaster if directed against the Hor. Thus, as manifested in the legend of the first Gandarab *k’awot*, this power should be contained within the framework of rituals that are appropriately conducted with the support of the elders in the age hierarchy.

According to the ideology underpinning the domestication of power emanating from outside, men are considered to be essential to the prosperity of the Hor. First, men are essential as warriors who directly transmit the fertility of the enemy’s blood. Second, they are essential as warriors who bring the genitalia of enemies, which are indispensable if the *k’awot* is to become perfect. Finally, they are essential as elders who domesticate the power of the *k’awot*, and channel it appropriately.

However, the fact that the spatial scheme does not reflect the actual situation of the Hor, who have been under Ethiopian rule since the beginning of twentieth century, is noteworthy. They had been ruled by the Italians during the Italian war, and many foreign NGOs, tourists, and researchers have visited the Hor during recent years. However, the patriarchal ideology based in this spatial scheme has been invisible to foreign visitors and rulers. As I describe in Section 4, foreigners and rulers have been deliberately excluded from the realm of Hor tradition. However, considering that the lives of the Hor are shaped largely by the state and the globalized world, this imagined space of tradition is severely limited.

The organization of the *ayana* possession cult appropriates a portion of the idioms in this tradition, but it also introduces idioms deriving from state and colonial rule that violate the schema of tradition and transcend its imagined space.

3. ORGANIZATION OF THE *AYANA* CULT

3.1. Organization

The highest rank in the *ayana* cult is the *k'awot*, derived from the title for pre-eminent chief. During my research, the *ayana* cult had four *k'awots*. Previously, two had been influential spirit mediums, and the other two had been priests (*mura*). The female counterpart of *k'awot* is known as *k'awote* in the *ayana* cult, a term that originally referred to the wife of the *k'awot* when the latter referred to the chieftainship of the Hor. However, the *k'awotes* of the *ayana* cult represent the four female spirit mediums who belong to the first generation of the cults. All *k'awots* and *k'awotes* participated in the formation of the cult.

Highly influential spirit mediums are called *k'alore*. There are approximately 50 *k'aloles* among the Hor. Having performed the *bane* ritual (see below, 2.2.3), they are permitted to treat clients.⁽¹⁾ *K'aloles* are regarded as seniors in the cults. (Fig. 2)

When possessed, mediums cannot control their own spirits. Priests, called *mura*, support the mediums and negotiate with the possessing spirits. The term *mura* originally referred to the elders in the age organization who organized distribution in the flood plain. However, the role of the *mura* in *ayana* cults involves mediating among spirits, mediums, and clients and managing issues concerning the cults. They are selected at a *bane* ritual by the spirits possessing the *k'aloles*. At present, there are five *muras*, all males.

The *mura* is a coordinator of the cults. Anyone suffering from illness or troubled by difficulties can visit a medium as a client to ask for advice. The *mura* participates in the treatment and transmits the words of spirits to clients. He accepts offerings from clients and passes them on to mediums, arranges the rituals of the cult, sends messages to participants, and administers the ritual process.

In partnership with a dozen mediums, the five *muras* become the nodal points of five regional cults. (Fig.3) The process whereby cults are formed is closely related to the process whereby mediums are initiated.

3.2. The Process of Initiating Mediums

3.2.1. From Illness to Possession

Sickness is symptomatic of *ayana* possession. When a patient has a high fever, she is first treated with traditional medicine. If she does not recover, she will be taken to a modern clinic in the town near the settlement. If she does not recover, she will be brought to a diviner (*moro*).

The diviner may suspect a curse or some kind of trouble caused by indigenous spirits living underground. If the patient's sickness is caused by a curse, the diviner will tell his patient to soothe the suspected person with a gift. If the trouble is caused by spiritual beings, the diviner will teach his client how to appease them, and the client will perform a ritual according to the advice (see 3.1).

If all these attempts fail to restore the health of a client, the diviner will suspect *ayana* possession

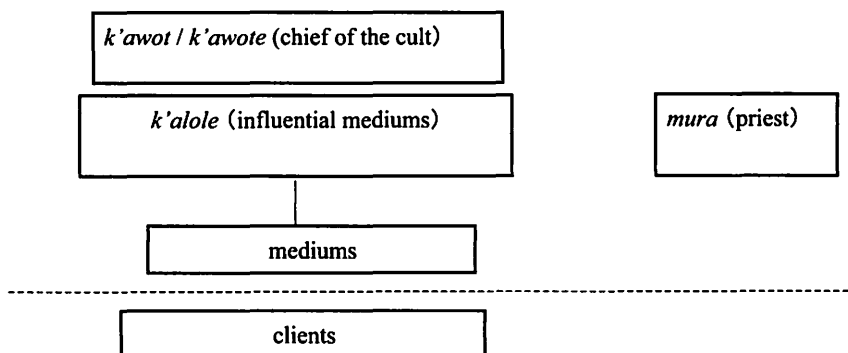


Fig. 2. Organization of the Cult

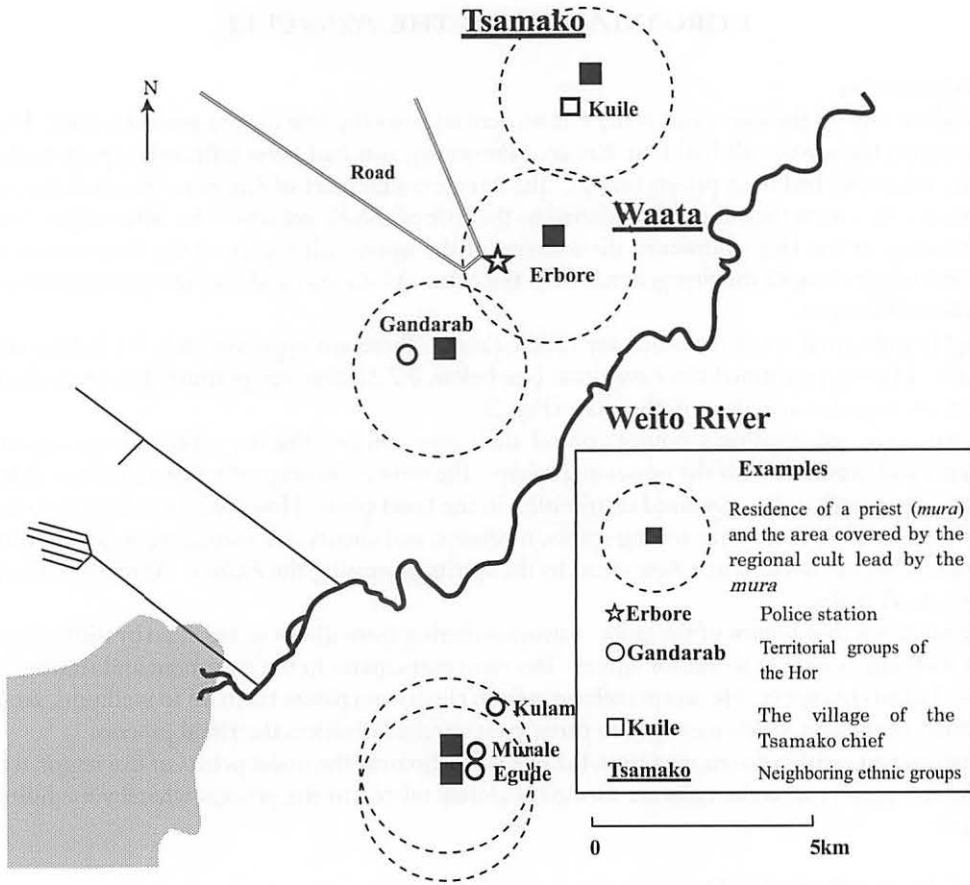


Fig. 3. Hor Territorial Groups and Regional Distribution of the Cults

and recommend that his patient consult a *mura*. After consultation, the *mura*, accompanied by mediums, will visit the house of the client and hold a séance at which the participants chant and wait for a spirit to appear.

The séance sometimes continues for several days. If the client falls into a trance and starts murmuring, a sign that the person is possessed by a spirit, the *mura* asks the spirit to identify itself and what it wants. After identifying itself and revealing what it wants, such as some kind of shawl, coffee, incense, or grass, the spirit is assured by the *mura* that its request will be fulfilled if it stops harming the client. The client is then considered to be a neophyte medium.

Most spirits have established relationships with one of the *k'aloles*; in other words, the spirit of an influential medium often possesses a neophyte. The spirit of the medium and the newly possessed are considered to have a "parent-child" relationship. One medium produces several "children," and "children" produce "grandchildren." The Hor describe this process of expansion as a creeper extending its vines. The members form a fictitious lineage (*wari*) and help each other during rituals.

3.2.2. Séance

Spirits may communicate their wishes to their mediums in dreams in addition to revealing them in séances. They may tell their mediums to offer such items as coffee, fragrant wood, and shawls, and to entertain them with dance and songs. The medium must soothe her spirits periodically by holding a séance known as *addar*. Otherwise, the spirits harm the medium by making her/him sick or by making her/him meet with an accident, such as falling on a fire. The medium tells her *mura* to hold a séance, and the *mura* informs the members of the cult to participate.

On the day of the *séance*, the *mura* goes into the bush with some *k'aloles* to collect a grass known as *ch'affé*. Each *ayana* has its own favorite kinds of grass. For example, the favorite types of grass of one *ayana* are *zerante* (Graminae spp.), *kondate* (*Cyperus rotundus* L.), *mederte* (*Cordia sinensis* Lam.), and *gomicha* (unidentified). The medium holding the *séance* prepares coffee and burns fragrant wood, referred to as *et'an*, in her house.

At night, the *mura* and *k'aloles* enter the house of the medium, spreading the grass they have collected along the passage to the entrance of the house and on the floor inside the house. At midnight, they start to chant. The *mura* beats a drum called a *dibbe*. Several dozen members participate, and several of them fall into trances. Most members are mediums, but some newcomers who are interested in the cult may also be included. When one falls into trance, the *mura* and *k'aloles* put a shawl on the possessed, and the *mura* asks the possessing spirit to express its demands. The spirit expresses its wishes, usually in the Borana language. The demands made by spirits are not always identical and may change according to the personal situations of the mediums they possess. A spirit may only ask for what it wants, such as a certain kind of shawl; it may give advice about family matters, such as whom a daughter should marry; and it may appoint a new *mura*, who is then expected to manage its cult. The *mura* escorts the possessed to a spear called an *ankase*, which is planted in the ground at a corner of the house. Spirits are often said to enter and exit a house through this spear, and it seems that the *mura*, judging the state of the medium and the duration of possession, allows the spirit to leave by escorting the medium to the spear. The *mura* pours water on mediums who lose consciousness after the spirits leave. After the medium recovers consciousness, the *mura* informs her of the words spoken by the spirit.

The atmosphere of *séances* is characterized by merriment and laughter. Several spirits possess a medium sequentially. Some of these are animal spirits, and mediums imitate the movements of snakes, hyenas, and lions. Some mediums take fire from the hearth and put it into their mouths. Others dance to the beat of the drum in a quick rhythm. Spirits that come from different countries salute each other in foreign languages. Participants enjoy such comical behaviors enacted by the spirits.

In the middle of the *séance*, the *mura's* assistant boils a pot of water on the hearth. She then roasts some coffee beans in a pan and lets participants enjoy the resulting smell by fanning the smoke with her hand. She serves coffee in empty tomato sauce cans instead of ceramic cups, and roasts maize in a pan, subsequently serving it.

The *séance* continues until two or three o'clock in the morning. Participants go home after the last spirit has left a medium.

3.2.3. Rituals of Promotion and Retirement

When a medium has had sufficient experience, she performs a ritual known as *bane*.⁽²⁾ Many mediums and clients are invited, and the climax of the ritual occurs during the second day when a small animal is slaughtered as per the demand of the *ayana* spirit. The animal's throat is cut with one stroke and the medium, in a trance, jumps at the throat and sips the blood. The shawl demanded by the *ayana* spirit is placed on the medium's shoulders. After the ritual, the medium becomes a *k'alore*, the senior of the cult, and is permitted to have clients and treat them in exchange for gifts.

When a medium gets old and experiences difficulties in enduring spirit possession, she performs a ritual called *hanfa*. The structure of the ritual is similar to that of the *bane*. After the ritual, she is released by the spirits.

The cult of *ayana* spirits is characterized by a strict hierarchy. After joining the cult, mediums must hold *séances* periodically to soothe the spirits. Even during these *séances*, the hierarchal order is observed. When the senior members of the cult are possessed, the spirits that possess the juniors leave them out of respect (*fokko*). The cults share a common value with the age set of the Hor: adherence to the hierarchy and obedience to seniors:

A medium increases her experience and becomes a senior in the cult by performing the *bane* ritual. She then starts treating clients, listening to their agony, solving their troubles, and curing their ill-

nesses. The cults earn revenue to maintain their organization from two sources. One source involves séances, through which mediums demand what they want through the words of spirits, shifting the financial burden for meeting these demands to family and kin. The other source involves gifts given by clients in return for treatment. Some part of this revenue is offered to the seniors through such rituals as the *bane* and is allocated for maintaining the organization of the cults.

4. THE POWER OF THE INSIDE AND THE POWER OF THE OUTSIDE

Ayana has an ambiguous image and is often compared to wind, moving from one medium to another, and leaving each medium suddenly. *Ayana* is also said to be the wind of the god (*hefer waaket*), and the errand of the god (*erga waaket*). The Hor consider the god to be benevolent, and the *ayana* is regarded as the spirit that brings affluence.

On the other hand, *ayana* is often associated with illness because it causes illness and, at times, death when it comes to the medium for the first time. *Ayana* is thus dangerous and associated with misfortune. This ambiguous image is related to the social and spatial images that are attached to spirits by the Hor.

4.1. *The Power of the Inside and Outside*

The dangerous power of *ayana* is often associated with the power of other spirits. *Malaika*, the spirit of the dead, is feared by the Hor as the most dangerous spirit. When someone dies, the Hor hold a funeral (*boi*), and bury the body near the settlement of the dead. At this time, the spirit of the dead is believed to remain in the settlement, possibly causing illness to the inhabitants. The *malaika* ceases to harm the inhabitants of the settlement only after the performance of a ritual, *salalto*, which involves arranging a pile of tombstones (*sandoite*) at the cemetery and thereby soothing the dead by offering sacrifices. The structure of a cemetery is similar to that of the settlement, and the dead are regarded as being buried in their own settlement. If an illness is caused by a *malaika*, a he-goat is slaughtered and its blood and mesentery are offered with some coffee and sorghum.

Other spirits, such as *gando*, *zugru*, and *jano* are also believed to cause illness. They are said to remain in the settlement, especially near anthills, which symbolize tombs. Possession by these spirits is treated by constructing four arched gates, called *hulko*, from branches of *mederte* (*Cordia sinensis* Lam.) and *birile* (*Acacia* spp.) trees and arranging these in a row near an anthill. The patient enters at the west, where a fire has been made, and moves eastward through the gates.

When a person dies, the Hor customarily make a fire that is kept burning for three days for a woman and for four days for a man. This fire is said to symbolize the hearth fire of the house to which the dead belonged. The fire at the entrance to the *hulko* thus signifies that the fire of the patient's house has been moved outside and is buried with the patient. The Hor consider east to be the direction of birth and west to be that of death. Hor settlements are constructed according to this symbolism, and important rituals, such as the transition ceremony of age grade, are performed according to this scheme. The eastward direction of the patient's movement through the *hulko* thus indicates that he or she is reborn after death.

Thus, this ritual of spirit appeasement using the *hulko* gate symbolizes the death and rebirth of the patient. The head of the patient's family presides over this ritual and appeases the spirit with gifts.

These spirits are closely associated with the concept of the outside (*ige*). The outside is contrasted with the inside (*nab*) of settlement (*dirr*), where important rituals are held. The space of the outside starts at the circumference of the settlement and extends to the forests, river, and savanna, where people meet wild animals, spirits, and enemies. Outside, they may encounter *malaika*, shadows of their acquaintances (*gaya*), and the lost guardian spirit of *k'awot* (*urgo*). These spirits, which invade the realm of the inside and cause illness, must be returned to the outside, where they belong, through an appropriate ritual. Ritual appeasement of indigenous spirits thus demonstrates the reconstruction of social order of the inside under the authority of the head of the family. The spatial structure of the

ritual mirrors that of the patriarchal tradition that domesticates the power of the *k'awot*.

The spatial structure of *ayana* possession is also reflected in the initial stage of possession. Patients possessed by *ayana* for the first time are often found in places referred to as the outside. The following case shows the close association of *ayana* with the spirits of the outside.

The mother of Shada Armar,⁽³⁾ who was the *k'awot* of Kuile, became sick.⁽⁴⁾ A medium of an *anaya* cult, Arniro Galano, was asked to treat her. He was told that she was possessed by the spirit called Jani Kooba, the spirit of a termite anthill. She recovered by after a *hulko* ritual was held near an anthill, but the spirit then possessed and killed Shada's daughter. Next, the spirit moved to Shada, and he became sick. Arniro treated him again, this time informing Shada that the spirit was dangerous and that it would change into a good *ayana* if Shada wanted to have an *ayana*. He also informed Shada that he could not be a medium, since he was the *k'awot* of the pastoralists (*zelan*). Next, the medium allowed the spirit to possess Shada's wife. During the following night, a *séance* was held by the mediums of an *ayana* cult that was based in Kuile and the spirit revealed its name to be "Allah." Shada recovered. (Dadi Dalacha, Gandarab, 8/8/2002)

In this case, *ayana* and Jani Kooba were interchangeable. The dangerous power of *ayana* was associated with the indigenous spirits that remained on the outside. At first, Arniro Galano, the *ayana* medium who was asked to treat the patient, advised holding a *hulko* ritual. After this ritual failed, he reinterpreted the situation as involving possession by an *ayana*, and advised the patient to accept the spirit if he wanted it to be benevolent. He subsequently allowed other mediums in the cult to intervene and manage the situation.

It should be noted that Shada Armar, the patient, and the *k'awot* of Kuile were informed that the Shada could not be an *ayana* medium because he was a *k'awot* of the pastoralists.⁽⁵⁾ The source of this episode could not explain in detail why a *k'awot* could not be a medium.⁽⁶⁾ However, it seems difficult for any *k'awot* to become an *ayana* medium because *ayana* possession cults have introduced foreign cultural elements that have been strictly excluded from the tradition in which *k'awots* are embedded. In the next section, I show how *ayana* possession cults appropriate foreign cultural elements.

4.2. From the Power of the Outside to the Power of the World

Ayana spirits reveal their names and origins during healing rituals. Most come from outside of the Hor, including from Borana, Konso, Somali, Amhara, Kenya, and European countries.

Most members who became mediums during the early development of cults were possessed by spirits of the Borana. These spirits identified themselves as Oda, Boru, and so on. Somali spirits were also common. Their common names are Allah, Islaa, Alimara, and Hambla. Presently, the most popular *ayana* are those of the Amhara. Grannyu, Adale, and Handulo are popular Amhara *ayana* names. Recently, foreign *ayana* spirits have been increasing. They are known as Manyorki, Marian, and Salian, and are reputed to utter unintelligible foreign words.

While dreaming, mediums often see the *ayanans* that possess them, and they can depict these images very vividly. The following represents a memory reported by Niro Korjale, who was possessed by an *ayana* during the period immediately following its introduction to the Hor.

"Grannyu comes to me in my dream. He wears a garment of red, green, and yellow. He orders me to bring soap. Since he doesn't like filthy things, he orders me not to run out of soap. He comes to my house at night riding on horseback. Then he enters my house and comes to an *ankase*. He repeats it four times and leaves. I don't know where he goes." (Niro Korjale, Gandarab, 26/08/2002)

The garment worn by the spirit resembles the flag of Ethiopia and the Hor associate riding on horseback with the Amhara officials in power during the rule of Ethiopian Empire. These officials persecuted the Hor, and the Hor would flee when they saw a horse approaching. The odor of soap

is regarded as the smell of the Amhara; this smell is contrasted with that of butter, which the Hor women apply to their bodies. This *ayana* has possessed other eight mediums, all of whom were children of Niro Korjale.

This case shows how the experience of *ayana* spirit possession is closely associated with the memory of state rule, an abhorrent experience for the dominant elders presiding over the Hor. The next case also shows the association between state rule and *ayana* possession, but from a slightly different perspective. Soti Argore is an influential male medium in Gandarab.

“At that time, I was in a militia and went to Kenya to attend a meeting. The Kenyan police station included houses. Communications equipment was located in the first house, and the second house was used for lodging. In the latter house, there were many colorful clothes. I had never seen such clothes. There were hairs from a giraffe tail. I bought these, and returned to the Hor by car.

“I became sick five days later. I didn’t eat or drink. I didn’t know where I had become sick. At night, the Kenyans came to me. They were the Kenyans I had seen at the meeting and they wore the clothes I had seen in the police station.

“I had been in the house of my brother in Gandarab, but I went out and ran to Bilbilo (the southern area of the Hor). I said that I wanted to go to Kenya since my friends were in Kenya.

“Then, some *ayana* mediums came, and tried to let the spirits talk. But the language spoken by the spirits was unintelligible. Then, a spirit named Walki came and started to translate. Four *ayanas* came out.

“I gave the spirits an *ankase* (a wooden stick with a point of steel), and I prepared gourds of honey wine and drank the blood of a slaughtered goat. I became a big medium.” (Soti Argore, Gandarab, 13/09/2002)

Soti went to Kenya during the period of Derg rule; he was accompanied by a cadre, Gino Sura, who, at that time, was the most powerful mediator between the Hor and the government. They went to a town bordering Kenya, near Lake Turkana, and discussed local security matters with Kenyan policemen. There were many Gabra men among them, and they could communicate with each other in the Borana language. Gino brought three jerry cans of local *araq*i (distilled spirits) for them, and Soti was impressed with the unrestrained way in which they consumed it.

The compound contained a bar, at which women entertained the policemen, as well as a shop that sold many products that Soti had never seen.

During Derg rule, the younger generation was organized into militias by Gino. They were the first generation to travel outside of the Hor area by car and to see the Amhara and foreign countries. The spirit possession of Soti seems to have been triggered by his amazement at seeing previously unknown material abundance.

4.3. Symbols of Rituals

The images of *ayana* spirits represent the vast world outside of the Hor. The images of the Amhara and the Ethiopian empire, in particular, occupy a central position within this symbology. The *addar* séance, for example, includes features appropriated from the coffee ceremony practiced by the Amhara.

Ch'affe, which a *mura* spreads before a séance, represents an imitation of the grass spread by the Amhara during their new year and ordinary coffee ceremonies. Amhara women roast coffee beans and allow participants to smell its smoke in a coffee ceremony. The pot used for boiling coffee is known as a *jabana*, and the cup for serving coffee is known as a *sini*. These words are derived from Amharic. Roasted maize is called *k'irs*, which means breakfast in Amharic.

The method for cutting the throat of small livestock during the *bane* ritual is similar to the method reportedly used by the Amhara to slaughter livestock. However, the Hor usually slaughter animals by cutting their throats four times and disapprove of how the Amhara perform slaughters.

Offerings given by the clients of *ayana* mediums are identical to the goods brought to the Hor during the Amhara rule: cash, bottles of honey wine, soap, and clothes.

The spear, known as *ankase*, represents an important ritual tool that serves as the site on which *ayana* spirits descend. The *ankase* is a wooden stick, 1.5 m long, with a steel point on one tip. Three or four branches emanate from the other tip of the stick. It is usually placed into the ground at a corner of the medium's house. Ritual tools such as gourds, fragrant woods, and offerings are hung on its branches.

Ankase is an Amharic word.⁽⁷⁾ During the reign of the Ethiopian empire, officials of the empire always carried this as a weapon for stabbing animals and humans. However, some of the Hor remember another purpose for this stick. When empire officials arrived, they ordered the Hor to offer them small livestock, which they slaughtered. They then cut the meat, hung pieces on the branches of the *ankase*, and ate them raw with red peppers. If the officials did not have an *ankase*, they ordered their followers to stand nearby and to keep the meat in their hands. For the Hor, the *ankase* signifies the greed with which the Amhara appropriated and consumed the wealth of the Hor.

5. RESISTANCE AND DESIRE

5.1. *The Hypothesis of Marginality and Resistance*

The symbols used in *ayana* cults are appropriated from Amhara rituals, and reflect memories of state rule. Yet, considering the disgust with which most Hor view the Amhara culture, it is surprising that the *ayana* cults use such symbols.

According to Lewis, marginalized members of the society, such as women, are often possessed by alien spirits. Because they can attribute unreasonable behavior to the amorality of alien spirits who do not conform to the norms of their society, the possessed can make extravagant demands that would be prohibited in ordinary life (Lewis 1971).

Most mediums in the *ayana* cults are women, and those who fall into trance states during séances are also women. Table 1 shows the number of influential mediums who have held the *bane* ritual according to territorial section and sex.

This Table suggests that women outnumber men among influential mediums. Indeed, a substantial number of women seem to participate in cults. The mediums I interviewed usually had more than six "children," but these numbers may represent an overestimate, as the most influential mediums served as my informants. If one influential medium produced three children, mediums would number 192. If 86% of the mediums were women, female mediums would number 165. If half of the population of the Hor (4,000) were adult, and half the adults were female, adult women would number 1,000. This simple calculation suggests that one out of every six adult women has had the experience of being possessed by an *ayana*.

The present status of the *ayana* possession cults of the Hor seems consistent with the hypothesis proposed by Lewis. In the patriarchal society of the Hor, women are politically and economically marginalized. They cannot enter the politics of the age system, and they are denied the right to own

Table 1. Number of Influential Mediums

Territorial Section	Male	Female	Total
Gandarab	3	26	29
Kulam	4	5	9
Murale	2	10	12
Egude	0	14	14
Total	9 (14%)	55 (86%)	64 (100%)

cattle and small livestock, the primary property of the Hor. However, if we consider the development of this possession cult from an exclusively economic perspective, that is, the desire of marginalized women to own property, we will miss the important social significance of this cult. We will examine this significance by briefly reviewing the history of a female medium.

5.2. *Escape from Patriarchal Rule*

Rufo Dadi, who is approximately 60 years old, is one of the most influential female mediums. She was possessed by a spirit when she was in her late teens. She had been living with her uncle but was told to stay with her father. She became ill when she returned to her father's house. Her father asked a diviner to treat her, and the diviner determined that a *malaika* had harmed her. He told them to construct *bulko* gates that could be traversed by other members of the family but that she was prohibited from entering. She rushed back to her uncle's house and fell unconscious in front of his cattle kraal. *Ayana* spirit possession was suspected. At first, a medium of Waata treated her, but this approach failed. Next, a medium of Gandarab, named Arniro Galano, treated her and a spirit known as Oda appeared.

After marriage, Rufo Dadi continued to have intimate relationships with some of the *ayana* cult members. Her husband hated these activities and prohibited her from participating in the cult. As a result, she put a curse on him, and the *ayana* spirits visited many misfortunes on him, leading to his eventual capitulation.

Rufo's case has some interesting features in common with other *ayana* possessions. Behind the process of sickness, diagnosis, and spirit possession lies a negotiation between a father and a daughter. Rufo had an intimate friend, named Bala Baje, when she lived in her uncle's village. When her father tried to control her, she became ill and her father interpreted this as originating from a *malaika*. A *malaika* is an ancestral spirit, and the healing ritual involved in its treatment strengthens the integration of the family by using the authority of the head of the family to soothe the spirits. If the daughter had acquiesced to the ritual, she would have been under the control of her father and forced to marry someone chosen by her father. Instead, Rufo found shelter from her father in the *ayana* cult. The priest (*mura*) of the medium (Arniro Galano) who treated her was Bala Baje, who later became one of the *ayana k'arwots*. Rufo Dadi was able to maintain her relationships with her male friends in the cult, and she herself became one of the central figures in the formation of the cult.

In general, girls are often possessed by *ayana* before marriage. Although it is difficult for women to escape from marriages arranged by their parents, the cults empower women after marriage by providing a safe haven for covert extramarital relationships. It is not uncommon for married Hor to have such relationships, but these sometimes end violently when revealed. These cults, cross-cutting lineages, clans, territorial sections, and even ethnic groups, provide places in which women can act freely. Furthermore, a female medium can even reverse the power balance in her family by mobilizing her *ayana* "lineage" and placing a curse of *ayana* spirits on her husband.

Recently, cults have started to interfere in the relationships between mediums and fiancés before marriage by mandating that the groom of the medium swear in front of the "father" (the influential medium) of the medium (the bride) that he will not interfere in the ritual activities of his wife. All the members of her *ayana* "lineage" attend this ritual and threaten the future husband with dire punishments inflicted by spirits if he does not obey.

Thus, interpreting *ayana* cults as mere means for the marginalized to profit economically is insufficient. Rather, this phenomenon represents a movement to construct a new social network by interrupting traditional rituals, and allowing the possessed to join an alternative social organization. However, one question remains: Why do the cults appropriate the disdained symbolism of Amhara rule? Lewis, for example, suggests that possessing spirits are alien because the possessed can attribute their unreasonable behavior to the amorality of the alien spirits who operate outside the norms of their (Hor) society. Contrary to Lewis, I will show that the alien spirits of the *ayana* cult represent desires that the Hor have hidden while under state and colonial rule. Furthermore, these desires are not only economic; they are also ideological and are based on the conceptualization of space. Because

alien spirits subvert the spatial scheme of the traditional patriarchal ideology, they have been adopted by those who are frustrated with the oppressiveness of tradition and who want to change how they imagine their community.

5.3. *Constructing a New Identity*

Ayana cults first appeared among the Hor during the early 1960s when young woman became sick and her husband took her to the Konso with two Waata men. The Waata are a small hunting group who live between the Borana and the Hor. A conflict between the Hor and their western neighbor, the Hamar, began during the mid-1940s and continued until the mid-1970s. This conflict caused some of the Hor to migrate east, across the Weito River, to the habitat of the Waata. The Hor immigrants had close contact with the Waata and became accustomed to their culture.

The two Waata men accompanying the sick woman had lived in the Borana area, knew *ayana* practices well, and took the woman to the *ayana* medium of the Konso, the northern neighbors of the Borana. Two young Hor men also made this trip to the Konso. They were friends, and one was a younger brother of Grazmatch Sura Gino, the most powerful Hor mediator of that time.

Since the Ethiopian conquest, the position of influential local headman (*ch'ik'a shum*) of the Hor had been inherited within the clan of Gandarab *k'awot* (Olmok clan). Though the Hor had despised Amhara rule, the position of the local headman as a strong intermediary with the regime was attractive because it entailed considerable power over the Hor. Those who became local headmen were eager to imitate the Amhara culture with displays of supremacy. They gave precious foreign goods, such as guns and clothing, to relatives and age mates and enlisted these relatives and age mates as followers. *K'awots*, on the other hand, were segregated from the domain of state politics and presided over the people in the domain of rituals. People resisted the state by upholding the patriarchal tradition, but a dilemma emerged. Olmok, which symbolized the authenticity of the tradition, also represented the power and wealth of the state and epitomized the repressed desires of the Hor vis a vis the power and wealth of the state (Miyawaki 2006).

In the 1960s, Sura Gino, a man from the Riis clan, distinguished himself as a mediator, gained the trust of Amhara officials, and was awarded the title of Grazmatch. However, the Gandarab elders, fearing that Sura might grow more powerful than the *k'awot*, did not accept him. Sura subsequently left the settlement of Gandarab and lived in the territory of the Konso with his kin. His home served as a meeting place where people of various backgrounds gathered, and Amhara officials often visited him. Fortune-tellers who offered apocalyptic prophecies came from the Hamar, Waata, and Borana, and Somali merchants came to trade. The two young men who went to the Konso to visit the *ayana* medium lived in this area and had a close relationship with Sura.

These two young men were impressed with the performance of the Konso medium and wanted to introduce the *ayana* cult to the Hor. One of them, named Bala Baje, met Somali *ayana* spirits in a dream after returning from the Konso.

At that time, members of the Hor started to experience possession by *ayana* spirits. In Gandarab, Gosha Arshal, Boru Arkulo, and Arniro Galano were possessed. Gosha was a member of the *k'awot* clan but he could not inherit this position, which demanded a perfect body, because his arm had been bitten by a crocodile. He became psychologically disturbed and began wandering naked in the forests. Boru Arkulo was a son of a strong local headman, who tried to inherit this position by offering many cattle to the Amhara officials as bribes. However, the elders of Gandarab did not allow him to be a local headman because his close friends included Sura Gino. He finally lost everything and became sick. Arniro Galano was a marginalized man from the beginning. He was very poor, had no livestock, dressed in rags, and spent his time wandering and begging for food from his neighbors.

Gosha lived among the Waata and became possessed by a spirit that originated in one of the two Waata men who took the sick Hor woman to the Konso medium. After this incident, the same spirit possessed Boru and Arniro. Bala became a priest of Arniro, and one of the spirits of Arniro possessed Rufo Dadi. Bala and Rufo had been lovers.

Many young men and women gathered around Bala and Rufo. Most paired off as lovers, and

women became mediums and men became priests. The group went on tours, held séances, and spread the *ayana* cult. Because the leading figures were accustomed to the culture of the Amhara, it was not difficult to appropriate its symbols to construct a new ritual system.

During this period of formation, men participated as eagerly as did women. Some male participants had lost in the local power struggle, and others had been affected by foreign culture under the influence of Sura Gino. Young women distressed by patriarchal rule also joined the cult. In the cult, “losers” were able to become influential mediums and gain followers. Young men tried to create an institution in which they could develop an alternative identity that could mediate between their tradition and the powerful Amhara culture. Young women could find a place in which freedom of behavior was assured.

During the Derg regime, the activities of the cults intensified. Many people were possessed and séances were held every night. However, the local government regarded the cults as frauds and began oppressing them. Policemen and militia intruded on séances with searchlights. Priests were arrested and forced to renounce their beliefs. Most men left the cults, but women continued to practice their beliefs. The memory of the Derg oppression is embodied as a spirit known as Cadre, symbolized as the flash from a searchlight.

6. CONCLUSION

Since most mediums in *ayana* possession cults are female, one may expect, as Lewis suggested, that women who are marginalized under patriarchal rule utilize spirit possession as a means to profit economically. This feature can be observed in *ayana* possession cults insofar as the possessed can make demands through the utterances of spirits and influential mediums are offered many gifts by their clients. Because Hor women are denied the right to own livestock, the only property that can be sold at markets and exchanged for commodities, such as coffee, soap, and shawls, becoming a medium provides a rare opportunity for women to gain access to such commodities. *Ayana* possession cults also serve as pretexts for women to escape from the control of men. Indeed, Hor girls are expected to be obedient to their fathers and cannot select their own husbands. After marriage, women are subordinate to their husbands and must get permission from their husbands to do anything other than their everyday chores. *Ayana* cults trespass the limitations set by lineages, clans, and ethnic groups and provide places in which women can act freely.

The most notable feature of *ayana* cults are their symbolism. The idioms of rituals and the characteristics of possessing spirits are appropriated from the cultures of the Amhara and foreigners. The implications of such items for the Hor can be understood from the perspective of their cultural resistance to state and colonial regimes, as such items are reminiscent of state and colonial rule. While state and colonial power were exerted through strong indigenous intermediaries, most members of the Hor tried to keep their dignity and cultural identity by maintaining their tradition, which is based on what I refer to as an imagined space in which geographical space and social norms are intertwined. The imagined space is a schema consisting of such categories as the inside and the outside and is maintained by rituals, legends, and practices, including waging wars against neighboring groups. The space prescribes the roles of men and women and represents a foundation of patriarchal ideology and ethnic identity. Considering their historical experiences with state and colonial rule, the imagined space of the Hor tradition is severely limited and can function only by neglecting elements of state and colonial power.

Ayana possession cults have had a strong impact on many members of the Hor insofar as such cults have incorporated alien elements that had been rejected by the Hor tradition. Before the introduction of the cults, such alien customs and artifacts had been monopolized by a few men who were granted power by the state. However, the fact that such items symbolize the inaccessible but irresistible wealth of the external world is noteworthy. The cults also appropriated the forms and values of the hegemonic tradition, including its age system. The formation of *ayana* possession cults was, thus,

an attempt by the Hor people to integrate their own tradition with the powerful alien culture. The history of cult formation reveals that the pioneers of the cults were varied but had been economically, politically, and culturally marginalized by the society. These included a girl who had escaped from the control of her father, a man who had to turn to begging because of his extreme impoverishment, and a man who failed in his aspiration to become a local headman. During this incipient stage, cults were comprised of both men and women.

During the Derg period, traditional values were minimized and violently attacked, and during this period the activity of the cults intensified. New spirits started to possess mediums, reflecting changes in the political situation, and the local government started to oppress cults. Younger generations of the Hor occupied the political scene and oppressed the cults not only because they regarded them as fraudulent from a “socialist” perspective, but also because the cults loomed as potential rivals to their cultural and political hegemony.

During the Derg period, many men left the cults, but women remained, not only because women were not targeted for oppression in the ways men were targeted, but also because the situation of women had not changed. While men gradually gained status as they began participating in local politics, women remained subordinate to men. The attempt to introduce women’s education by a leading mediator failed due to strong opposition from men. Most men did not want women to be educated because education seemed to free women from the control of men, thereby destroying the social order.

The cults enabled those experiencing the dilemma posed by patriarchal traditions and powerful foreign cultures to construct a new identity connected to the world outside. That the majority of current mediums are women reflects the economic and day-to-day marginalization of women as well as their strong desire to find an alternative way for imagining and acting in the wider world. Women should be urged to maintain and recreate this new tradition of the Hor.

NOTES

- (1) If a medium treats a client without having performed the *bane* ritual, she is not only punished by the elders of her cult, but is also believed to be harmed by her own spirits.
- (2) *Bane* means “open” in the Hor language, and it indicates that the initiate steps up to the higher stage of the cult.
- (3) All the names referred to in this article are pseudonyms.
- (4) Shada was the *k’awot* of the Tsamako, and lived in a settlement called Kuile, located a few kilometers north of Gandarab. The Hor believe that the *k’awot* of the Tsamako has strong powers of curse and blessing, and treat him as their own *k’awot*.
- (5) The word *zelan*, which in the interview with Dadi Dalacha was used to refer to pastoralists, is an Amharic word connoting savageness. The Hor sometimes refer to themselves as *zelan*, and this usage reflects their ambivalent attitude toward their tradition and the modernity brought by state rule. If the Hor are *zelan*, they live according to different norms than do the Amhara, and such norms are considered to be inferior to those of the Amhara, at least from the perspective of the Amhara.
- (6) Among the Hor, serving as a medium of *ayana* and a *k’awot* of a territorial group are considered to be incompatible. Gosha Arshal, a former *k’awot* of Gandarab, once served as a pioneering *ayana* medium (see 4.3). When he became a *k’awot*, he resigned from the position of medium.
- (7) This spear is called *jinfo* in the Hor language.

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