The Man in the Tree
A Note on a Somali Myth

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The Somali people, living at the junction of the Islamic world with that of Africa, partecipate in both. Their tradition is formed by their Islamic inheritance, and yet it is generally recognised that pre-islamic elements survive within it. To trace these elements can be of value for our knowledge both of Somali religious beliefs and culture in early times, and of the connections between the Somali and the other peoples of northeast Africa.

The Somali have traditionally symbolised their adherence to the Islamic faith in legends which trace their descent to ancestors coming from Arabia, and deriving from the lineage of the Prophet. Particular traditions of various clans and clan families tell of charismatic Sheikhs who converted the local people, and became their forefathers.

The Somali Stories

One well known legend is that which tells how the holy man is found in a tree, and of the people's efforts to induce him to come down, and become their ally and affine. The story is told in both northern and southern Somalia. The main versions of the legend available in published form are as follows:

(a) This version of the story comes from southern Somalia. The son (or the six sons) of the local leader discover a stranger — in one version identified as an immigrant Arab — in the branches of a tree. He refuses to come down, even though offered first a chair and then a horse, until one of the brothers allows him to descend onto his own shoulders. He takes him home and gives him his daughter in marriage; or she is promised before he will consent to descend.[1]

(b) Another version gives no name or origin to the stranger. He is found by

[1] Cerulli 1957, p. 62; Colucci 1924, p. 106. In the text I have not used the names of the persons in the story, since the spectre of « tribalism » can only distract attention from my actual point. I believe that the myth of the man in the tree *could* have become attached to any clan-ancestor. In fact, in version (a) and (b), the man is found by the sons of Hawiye. By Colucci he is identified as the Arab Balcad, who marries Faduma daughter of Jambele, son of Hawiye, and becomes the ancestor of the « five Balcad » clans, among whom the Ajuran are the most famous.

the girl herself as she grazes her flocks, sitting in « a tall tree like a sycomore ». He refuses to come down until she calls for her brothers and the other men of her clan. He then asks for three things; a hundred camels, a slave, and the girl herself in marriage. Moreover he must climb down onto the back of a man and her brother accepts this office.

« This man, who knows who he was? He was seen in a tree ».

Ninkaas nimaas yehay ya og? Geed korkiisii aa lagu arkay.[2]

(c)The Sheikh, while still a young man in Arabia, has already showed marks of divine favour. He is exiled from his home by a jealous uncle, and arrives on the Somali coast, but at first meets no human beings. He digs himself a well beside a large tree. Here he is discovered by the daughter of the leading man of that country, who is pasturing her father's flocks; he waters the animals at his well, and thereafter she comes there regularly.

Her father, noticing that the stock have been watered, follows her with a party of warriors, and discovers the young man. The latter takes refuge in the branches of the tree, after covering the well with a large stone. The chieftain and his men try to lift the stone, but in vain. They plead with the young man to come down from the tree, but he refuses to do so until the chieftain promises him his daughter in marriage, and then allows him to climb down by taking him on his own shoulders. From this marriage springs one of the principle branches of the Somali people.[3]

Version (a) and (b) of the story have some unexplained features. Why was the stranger in the tree, and why was he so unwilling to descend to earth? Moreover, since he had not shown any sign of special powers, why were the local people so eager to form an alliance with him? The teller of (b) explained that « the men of those days were very few - what they needed was support », but they still seem to go to disproportionate lenghts to gain a single supporter.

These questions are answered in version (c), in which the Skeikh climbs into the tree in order to protect himself from the girl's father and his party of armed men; while the latter are motivated to gain his friendship by his miraculous command over the well. Are these details then part of an original story, of which versions (a) and (b) are confused reminiscences, or do they rather represent a rationalisation of an older tradition which had come to seem bizarre?

In this context it is worth looking at certain myths of the southern Oromo, neighbours and culturally and linguistically related to the Somali.

Heaven, Earth and Ancestors

The Qallus, the great priest figures of the southern Oromo, to whom many supernatural powers are attributed, form hereditary dynasties. The ancestors of these dynasties are all held to be of supernatural origin. One of the two Qallus of the Boran, the Qallu Karayu, is said to have fallen from the clouds, on a

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[2] Cerulli 1959, pp. 251-252. This version is given as a recorded text.

[3] The hero in this version is Sheikh Daarood, and his bride is Dombiro, daughter of Dir. (Drake-Brockman 1912, p. 72; Lewis 1955, pp. 18-19; Laurence 1954, pp. 134-138). Sheikh Daarood is also called Cabderrahman Ismacil, and sometimes identified as as the son of the Arabian Saint, ᶜIsma ᶜil Jabarti (Lewis, op. cit., p. 131n; Cerulli 1957, pp. 60-61). Cerulli comments that this identification probably represents the fusion of an « ancient Somali legend » about Daarood and Dombiro, with a more recent « Arabizing » tradition.

day when they hung so low that they nearly touched the earth, and he descended with the rain, bringing with him cattle, and various sacred objects.[4]

The other Boran Qallu, the Qallu Oditu, is similarly said to have fallen from the sky.[5] Similarly, the Qallu of the Arsi is associated with an ancestor from the above — *Wayu Waqa bue*, « Wayu who fell from the sky », or « from God » — God and the sky being more or less identified with one another. Wayu is said to have returned to the sky — i.e. to God — after his death, and is now prayed to for help,[6] (or was, until recently).

The first Qallu of the Guji Oromo is said to have fallen from the sky, bringing with him things necessary for life, such as barley and coffee, as well as the principal ritual objects. He remained silent, and all efforts to get him to speak were useless, until he was approached by a beautiful girl belonging to the Galalcha clan, who are said to have magical powers. When she smiled and spoke to him, he smiled back, took her by the wrist (since then the Guji take their brides by the wrist during the marriage ceremony) and spoke: « I am the son of God, and come from the sky; [7] I am the Qallu whom seven peoples, the Uraga, Alabdu, Mati, Hoky, Shelo, Otu and Darassa, must venerate ».[8]

The story of a king or leader from the sky is not confined to the Oromo, but is a common one among Ethiopian peoples.[9] A myth of the Baka people of southwest Ethiopia, for instance, describes how the first two Baka priests were walking through the forest when they saw a person of strange appearance sitting in a tree. After much persuasion they finally induced him to come down, and he became their king, Serser, after the former ruler had willingly resigned his place to him. Beka informants emphasized that the two priests did not know « whether he came from Earth or Heaven, from the water or from the tree »; but other traditions suggest that an origin from the sky was considered essential for a true king.[10] Serser's descent was followed by that of the divine maiden, Gila, who came down in the lightning and the rain, bringing with her the bamboo plant, culturally very important to the Baka. In this story it is she who cannot be brought to speak, until Serser himself speaks to her. She later returns to the sky.

The ancestor of the chief priest of the Ubamer people, according to one account, emerged from the Kaki tree. By another, he descended from the sky on a spider's thread, and sat under the Kaki tree, where he lit a fire. When the people, attracted by the smoke, discovered him they said, « God has sent you from heaven; therefore you shall be our priest ».[11] Other instances of the idea that the original king, priest or clan ancestor made the passage from heaven to

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[4] Haberland 1956, p. 159.

[5] Ibid., p. 157.

[6] Ibid., pp. 443, 472.

[7] Quoted in German by Haberland. « God » and « the sky » were presumably the same in the original text.

[8] Ibid., p. 302. This story, in which the supernatural stranger can only be induced to communicate with human beings by a girl, has a parallel among another branch of the Oromo, further north, in the origin legend of the Adami dynasty of the Kingdom of Guma. Here Adamo, the wild man of the woods, a being of superhuman strength, is tamed by the princess of Guma, the only person who dares to approach his cave. In her embrace, he loses much of his strength and all his ferocity. He marries her and founds the new dynasty. (Cerulli 1922, pp. 152-3; 1933, p. 145).

[9] Haberland 1965, p. 285.

[10] Jensen 1959, pp. 35-37.

[11] Ibid., p. 179.

earth are found among the Janjero,[12] and the Sidamo.[13] They are part of the whole complex of ideas to do with the separation of the sky (God) from earth, and the special identification of certain persons with the sky-God, which form a constant mythical theme in the traditional religions of this part of the world.

Conclusion - The Man who Fell to Earth

The Somali stories fit neatly into this group of ancestor myths, in which the theme of the tree, descent from the sky, and the bringing of an alien being into human society by the offer of a bride, are combined in various ways. They belong to a mythic tradition in which sacred persons or objects come physically from the sky, because the sky is not so much God's dwelling place as God himself. The tree, as well as being often sacred in its own right, is a suitable ladder between Heaven, or God, and the earth.

If the Somali legends are seen within this framework, they appear as variants of a significant and dramatically satisfying myth. The importance attached to getting the stranger to come down from the tree, and the lengthy negotiations before he consents, which in the existing versions seem excessive, are entirely appropriate if in the original story he came from Heaven rather than from Arabia. The descent then represents the first contact with the earth of a being from another world, and with it, his incoporation into the realm of human relations — both the emotional and domestic (the bride) and the public and political (the father- and brothers-in-law).

The lengths to which the people go to gain the stranger's alliance are also comprehensible, if he is evidently an extraordinary being, rather than a mere son of Adam.

Such traditions, as well as being interesting historically, need not be dismissed by modern people as merely trivial or « primitive ». The theme with which they deal — the relationship of the human with the more-than-human — is of universal significance. And to imagine this concretely as the physical passage of a being or a thing is as characteristic of 20th century industrial society as of any other; as the persistent speculation about UFOs and extra-terrestrials shows, though in the context of a modern cosmology.

It is, however, incompatible with Islam, with its emphasis on the total otherness of God. With conversion, the divine becomes radically removed from the human sphere, and it is no longer admissable to attribute to the ancestor such a direct relationship with heaven. Arabia is now the realm in which the divine has touched the human, and from where all blessing originates; so the charismatic ancestor now comes from over the sea. The old myths are fitted into the new belief system — but sometimes the join is a little awkward.

If this is correct, then the myth of the man in the tree shows the fusing of the two sides of the Somali tradition, the African, and that of Islam.

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[12] Straube 1963, p. 309.
[13] Brøgge 1986, p. 32.
[14] Haberland, loc. cit.; Lange 1981, pp. 18-20; Bartels 1983, p. 141; Straube 1963, pp. 45, 105.

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