

Contested Religious Authority: Sufi Women in Ethiopia and Eritrea

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Abstract

The African experience in works dealing with Sufi women shows a concentration of classical and more recent works in the Maghreb and in West Africa. There is an observable gap in academic writings on the Horn of Africa where only scarce and fragmentary studies are available on women's involvement and leadership in Sufism. Works focusing on Somalia address such themes as women's oral literature, religious practices, and everyday religion. The challenges Sufi women face in legitimizing their power, their experiences in a strong patriarchal society, the dominant discursive gendering strategy in defining religious orthodoxy, and the different mechanisms used by these women to establish and protect their religious power are marginalized themes in the region. Furthermore, by clearly showing the different coping mechanisms adopted by two religious figures and the different activities they lead as custodians of Sufi shrines, this paper stresses the need to go beyond the dominant academic discourse that overshadows the agency of women and instead magnify the passive status women have in the African sociopolitical landscape. This paper focuses on these themes and contributes to this gap through a comparative case study of two prominent Sufi figures from two different parts of the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Keywords

women – gender – Islam – Sufism – leadership – Northeast Africa

Introduction

Since the 1970s the academic discourses on gender in Africa have been dominated by discussions of women's disempowerment in different realms of life (Cornwall 2009). Case studies on the socioeconomic role and status of women from different corners of the continent have been used as justifications for this disempowerment thesis. There is a consensus among scholars that in Africa women's position in ownership and access to means of production, political participation, and education is low. Such dominant narratives often overshadow the agency of women by accenting their passive status in African societies. Similarly, women's role in different religious traditions, especially in Islam, Sufism, and among Sufi brotherhoods, is a topic that has received relatively little attention, especially in the region under consideration, i.e., the Horn of Africa. A review of the rich scholarly pieces available on male religious figures and Sufi spiritual and intellectual traditions tends to give the impression that Sufism is a predominantly masculine entity.

This has occurred despite the long history of female Sufi scholars' contributions to Islamic knowledge and its spiritual tradition. One of the most popular *walī* ('Friend of God') in early Islamic history was a woman: the mystic Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 801), respected by legalists and scripturalists like Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). She is an emblematic and classical figure in Sufi literature (Smith 1928). Some works shed light on forgotten feminine figures of Islamic spiritual tradition. In *Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure* (2003), Helminski presents a selection of biographical anecdotes and personal memoirs about an array of Sufi women from different parts of the world, ranging from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to Europe and America. This includes accounts of female spiritual figures from members of the Prophet's family to modern and contemporary personalities and their literary production. Other contemporary scholars have also addressed the 'feminine' in Islamic mysticism (Scattolin 1993; Schimmel 2003; Bruzzi 2013; Meron 2015). In *Sufi Women* (1983), Nurbakhsh gives a detailed account of women in Sufism from the early days of Islam to the present day, presenting the biographies and anecdotal stories of a number of highly reputed figures. All these works provide insights into the highly fragmentary and marginalized stories, practices, and literary contributions of Muslim women in Islamic mysticism starting with its first appearance in seventh century A.D.

In West African societies the presence, visibility, and dynamism of women in Sufism have been widely recognised and discussed by scholars from different disciplines. One of these renowned works focuses on the figure and exceptionally rich literary production of Nana Asma'u (1793-1864), a West African woman

who was a Muslim scholar and poet, the daughter of the spiritual and political leader of the Sokoto caliphate (Boyd and Mack 1997, 2000, 2013). These works present the great achievements of this figure, who served as an advisor to her father at the time he waged a *ḡihād* in the context of the Islamic renewal in present-day Northern Nigeria. Another famous example is that of Sokhna Magat Diop, a religious leader of the Murid brotherhood in Senegal, who inherited from her father the position of *khalifa* of the order (Coulon and Reveyrand 1990). Scholarly research conducted on women in Sufism have hence been concerned with whether or not women have a particular agency within Sufi brotherhoods (Coulon 1988; Callay and Creevey 1994; Creevey 1996; Bop 2005; Gemmeke 2008, 2009). Special focus has been placed on women's leadership and religious practices within Sufi orders such as the Tijaniyya and the Muridiyya (Hutson 1999, 2001; Vitale 2009; Hill 2010; Evers Rosander 2003; Robinson 2005).

The analysis of the relation between power and knowledge suggests divergent conclusions. It has been pointed out that women's lack of knowledge prevents them from gaining respect as religious leaders, forcing them to use secular mechanisms to challenge their prescribed roles in Islam (Bop 2005). From another perspective, an anthropological study underlines how Marabout women create authority in the frame of Sufi exoteric knowledge (Gemmeke 2008, 2009). Several scholars have discussed whether Sufi practices are especially attractive to women. In fact, certain holy places or living saints became the focus of women's piety where they could perform parallel and often separate practices 'which alternately earned them praise or condemnation from legalists' (Cuffel 2005).

In East African historiography cases of female saints are rare and poorly documented. This gap is due to methodological approaches and to the paucity of sources, not to an effective absence of these holy women in the history of the region. On the contrary, as recent studies point out, they left material evidence and oral narratives testifying to their leadership role in the region (Bruzzi 2011). For example, in East Africa we find the shrines of female Sufi religious figures such as those of Mana Siti Habib Jamaluddin (1804-1921), known as Dada Masiti, at Brava; *Sittī* Maryam al-Mirghanī (1870/71-1952) in Sinkat; and the above-mentioned *Sittī* Momina (d. 1929) in Arsi.

Unlike the western African cases mentioned above, there are only fragmentary sources on the Horn of Africa. Some of these works focus on Somalia and address such themes as women's oral literature, religious practices, and everyday religion (Kapteijns, Lidwien, and Maryan Omar Ali 1999; Declich 2000; Tiilikainen 2010). However, the Ethiopian and Eritrean cases clearly show the gap existing in studies dealing with women and leadership in Sufism in the

Horn (Bruzzi 2011; Meron 2015). In fact, the study on *Sittī* Momina (d. 1929), a prominent religious figure whose center is based at Faraqasa in Eastern Ethiopia, is the only available exception (Ishihara 2010). Drawing on this gap and as a contribution to the understanding of the subject, this article presents the case of two prominent women leaders from two shrines located in two different countries of the Horn, Eritrea and Ethiopia: *Sittī* 'Alawiyya (d.1940) from Eritrea and Toyība Sirağ (b.1934) from Ethiopia.

In this work we argue that despite this observable silence in scholarly research on the subject, women's role and involvement in Sufi practices and within Islamic orders in the Horn of Africa have been remarkable. By taking cases of female Sufi leaders from Ethiopia and Eritrea, two states with a long history of sociopolitical ties, we argue that the strong patriarchal system on the ground, the Islamic legalists discourses, and the deep-rooted gender biases contribute to challenge female religious power and authority. Furthermore, in discussing the agency of these female Sufi leaders, this paper brings to light the competing narratives on their roles that are often described by local communities as a two-faceted phenomenon: that of renowned female Muslim scholars, and an account that describes women as syncretising agents who are responsible for 'mixing' non-Islamic elements with the orthodox practises of Sufi centres. Through analysis of the life accounts of these two Sufi leaders, the paper argues that there is a need to look into the underlying gendering discourse in debates on Islamic orthodoxy. We argue that this gendering tendency has two elements: the way that religious practices practised by women are defined as 'heretical' by Islamic reformist movements, and the internal Othering by male Sufis who, in their counternarrative to the various Islamic reformist movements, emphasize that women should be held accountable for the 'unorthodox' Islamic practises at Sufi centres.

This paper discusses how both women adopted different mechanisms to resist those objecting to their authority, and to retain their power as custodians of the shrine. These different mechanisms ranged from embodying Sufi knowledge and spiritual traditions to establishing their own networks with different Sufi scholars and the government. Hence we argue that despite the fact that the female Sufi leaders' religious power is often inherited from their biological fathers, the maintenance of their spiritual power is largely informed by the different strategies they adopt by going beyond the mere claim of power through descent. Hence this contribution accents the agency of female religious figures by pointing at the way they legitimise their power, maintain it, and defend their different positions.

We adopt an ethnohistorical approach that capitalises on different research methods: archival research, oral narrative collection, and ethnographic field-

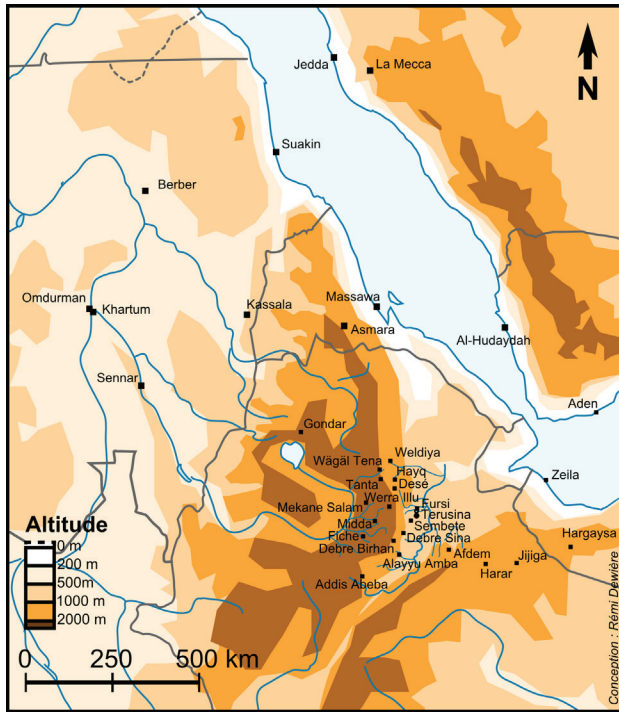


FIGURE 1 *Map by Rémi Dewièr: Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne University*

work. This historical and socioanthropological perspective allows us to identify elements of both continuity and change over time in Sufi women's leadership in the region. In addition, it sheds light on the impact that different sociopolitical settings have in promoting, allowing, or contesting the legacy of women's authority as spiritual guides.

The first part of the article presents the case of an early twentieth-century shrine located in Eritrea and the related role of a female religious leader, *Sittī* 'Alawiyya (1940). Since the death of her father *Sayyid* Hāshim al-Mīrghanī (1849-1902), the Eritrean representative of the Khatmiyya Sufi brotherhood, *Sittī* 'Alawiyya served as custodian of his shrines in the Eritrean seaport city of Massawa. Her religious and political leadership emerged progressively in the context of the Italian colonial occupation of Eritrea (1890-1941). This first case study is based on colonial and private sources and oral data collected in 2009 during fieldwork in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Egypt. The second part of the article deals with the case of the contemporary woman leader Toyība Sirağ, who succeeded her father *ḥāğgī* Siroğ Muḥammad (1885-1972), a member of

the Qādirīyya brotherhood. To understand the different religious practises currently carried out at this second shrine, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted on different occasions over a seven-year period from 2008 to 2015, with the latest visit to the shrine in March 2015.

Despite their location in different contexts as well as their affiliations to different brotherhoods, *Sittī* 'Alawiyya and Toyība share a similar socioreligious role as female Muslim representatives of a Sufi regional centre and custodians of shrines. This paper looks at how dominant social organisation patterns of patriarchy have impacted the transmission of authority in the succession of leadership power of these religious figures in different settings. By adopting a historical method of oral narrative, the paper analyses the elements of recognition and resistance that these women faced in the process of establishing their religious power. It presents the different challenges female leaders encounter in gaining legitimacy as custodians of Sufi shrines, and the challenges they face as female religious leaders in particular. In order to expose the debate over female Muslim leadership within Sufi centres in the region, the paper addresses the following general questions: what conditions provide women with the opportunity to gain religious leadership by succession in a dominantly patriarchal framework; and what are the major challenges that they face in the process of succession? Furthermore, the paper shows how gender comes into play in the contentions surrounding the orthodoxy of religious practices regularly practiced at the Sufi centres that these two mystics managed. It presents how in contemporary Sufi shrines elements of religious orthodoxy are framed on the basis of gender, and how scripture and culture have been used to justify such discursive gendering of 'religious impurity' in Sufi shrines. In order to better understand the leadership role these women play at Sufi shrines, we address the following questions: What are the religious practises performed at each shrine, and how are they associated with women? Who defines the degree of orthodoxy and nonorthodoxy of religious practices that Muslim women can perform at shrines? How do these issues relate to the gender dynamics that exist in each setting?

***Sittī* 'Alawiyya: The Custodian of the Shrine of *Sīdī* Hāshim, Close to Massawa (Eritrea)**

It was in the context of the Italian colonial rule over Eritrea that the influential personality of a female Muslim leader gained popularity. In the early twentieth century the Eritrean-Sudanese region was facing a period of crisis characterized on the one hand by increasing internal fragmentation of

political and religious leadership and, on the other hand, by an increasing infiltration of European colonial powers. The Mahdist uprising (1882-1885) in Sudan undermined the Turco-Egyptian establishment that was ruling a large part of present-day Sudan and Eritrea (1820/21-1885), providing Anglo-Egyptian and Italian armies further justification to penetrate progressively from the Red Sea coast to the hinterland to face the Mahdist 'threat'. The end of Turco-Egyptian rule and the later Mahdist defeats resulted in the Anglo-Egyptian occupation of Sudan (1899-1956) and the Italian colonial occupation of the Eritrean territory (1885-1941). In this period the Khatmiyya Islamic brotherhood gained a leading role in the fight against the Mahdiyya, and finally submitted to the British and Italian occupation of Sudan and Eritrea, respectively.

Sittī 'Alawiyya al-Mirghani (Massawa, 1892/93-1940) was an Eritrean representative of the Khatmiyya order.¹ In Sudan this *ṭarīqa* assumed an influential religious as well as sociopolitical role thanks to al-Ḥasan (1819-1869), who founded the main centre of the brotherhood, the township of Khatmiyya close to Kassala in Sudanese territory, during Turco-Egyptian rule (Voll 1969; Grandin 1989). The *ṭarīqa* was founded in the Ḥiḡāz around 1840 by *Sittī* 'Alawiyya's grandfather, *Sayyid* Muḥammad 'Uthmān al-Mirghani (Makka, 1793—Ṭā'if, 1853), a descendant of a Meccan ashraf family, marked by the Sufi tradition of Central Asia where the family originated (Hofheinz 1992). He was a Sufi mystic and scholar who was initiated into five *ṭuruq*, namely the Naqshbandiyya, the Qādiriyya, the Shādhiliyya, the Junaydiyya, and the Mirghaniyya, that of his grandfather. His learning and spiritual education were deeply influenced by his master Aḥmad b. Idrīs (1749/50-1837), a famous Moroccan scholar who also taught Sufism in Mecca, Upper Egypt, and Yemen. Aḥmad Ibn Idrīs recommended practical methods and disciplines to his pupils that were based on Sufi spiritual traditions. Among his references were classical Sufi masters such as Ibn al-Fāriḍ and Ibn al- 'Arabī. He urged his students to travel to African lands and proselytize Islam, but did not build any order or institution around himself. Only after his death did some of his disciples, such as Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Sanūsī (1787-1859), Ibrāhīm al-Rašīd (1817-74), and Muḥammad 'Uṭmān al-Mirghani (1793-1852), establish their own orders in Africa. Aḥmad Ibn Idrīs's traditions and teachings became particularly influent for several brotherhoods that were established in nineteenth-century Northeast Africa, namely the Aḥmadiyya, the Dandarawiyya, the Rašīdiyya, the Šālihiyya, and the Khatmiyya (O'Fahey 1990). These new orders shared a militant attitude in the context of the Islamic revivalism that was crossing African and Middle Eastern Muslim societies. In Eritrea the representative of the Khatmiyya *ṭarīqa* was *Sittī* 'Alawiyya's father, *Sayyid* Hāshim al-Mirghani (Massawa, 1849/50-1902).² Around 1860 he travelled from Ḥiḡāz to Maṣawwa', where he ended up exercising

authority in the Eritrean lowlands. After his stay in Western Eritrea he married an Eritrean woman. No information is available about this woman except for her origin from the Beni 'Āmir people, who were affiliated to the Khatmiyya thanks to *Sayyid* Hāshim's father, the founder of the order. On 1892-93 their child *sharīfa* 'Alawiyya was born, who would later on assume a leading role among Muslim people in the Eritrean lowlands. As inhabitants of the northern part of the Eritrean lowlands on the Sudanese border and on the coast of Massawa and Arkiko, the Beni 'Āmir people suffered in that period from political unrest and internal conflicts (Morin 2003). These years were crucial for the success against the Mahdiyya, thanks to the involvement of the Banī 'Āmir people who fought side by side with the British and Italian armies with the political support of the Khatmiyya. After the defeat of the Mahdiyya in Sudan, the Italian authorities sought with little success to contact *Sayyid* Hāshim. As the local mediator in control of the Muslim population in the Eritrean Colony, he was influential as the representative of the order (Romandini 1985; Miran 2005). In this period characterized by political and social instability he was a religious mentor particularly respected by the locals, who would visit him for social, religious, and medical reasons (Bruzzi 2012).

After his death in 1902 the Italian authorities participated in the construction of his shrine in Hutumlo, close to the Eritrean port of Massawa (Romandini 1984, 1985). His death left no male heirs and his daughters, Sittī Maryam and Sittī 'Alawiyya as orphans. According to the colonial view, this death of the only male representative of the Mīrghanī holy family would lead to a dangerous and destabilizing vacuum of religious leadership in the colony. Consequently, the colonial authorities in the Eritrean territory demanded a Mīrghanī male representative, *Sayyid* Ġa'far al-Mīrghanī (1871-1943), a nephew of *Sayyid* Hāshim who had been residing up to that time in Kassala in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, to take authority. The presence of *Sayyid* Ġa'far as the official representative of the Eritrean branch of the Khatmiyya in Keren seemed to contribute to the formation of an Islamic centre within the colonial borders. The growing influence of *Sayyid* Ġa'far in Keren, put forward and supported by the Italian colonial authorities, brought out the rivalry within the Khatmiyya between *Sayyid* Ġa'far and his relative *sharīfa* 'Alawiyya, daughter of *Sayyid* Hāshim al-Mīrghanī, who had been residing in Massawa. Several conflicts broke out within the community when she decided to move her residence to Keren. Consequently the colonial authorities warned that the situation could give rise to a possible split within the Eritrean branch of the *ṭarīqa* (Romandini 1984; Miran 2005; Bruzzi 2006). In fact, contrary to colonial expectations, Sittī 'Alawiyya soon emerged as a prominent political and religious mentor in the region. Her authority was increasingly recognized by locals and, accordingly, by colonial authorities. Colonial sources stress the efficiency of her intervention

as a mediator in conflict resolution with natives, and between them and the government.³ Both colonial archives and oral stories demonstrate that she played a pivotal role during several political issues: during the Italian war in Libya (1911-12) she organised fundraising campaigns for families of Eritreans who had died or been injured in the conflict;⁴ a Mīrghanī family tradition claims that she negotiated the end of the conflict between the Italian Government and the Sultan Anfari of Awsa in the 1930s;⁵ and during the Italian war in Ethiopia (1935-1941) she sought Ethiopian Muslim support and sent diplomatic letters to gain the favour of Muslims in the Bale region.⁶

In Eritrea *Sittī* 'Alawiyya's residence itself was a focal point for social and religious networks. In fact, by living close to her father's shrine in Hutumlo near the Eritrean port, she soon assumed an outstanding role in the area. It is important to recall that she was the custodian of shrines, that is, a traditional Sufi actor who is often the descendant of the 'saint'. Her titles tell us more about her role, which varied according to different interlocutors. Colonial reports available identify her with the Italian term *sceriffa* (corresponding to the feminine of the English word 'sheriff'), which recalls the idea of a legal official with responsibility for a country, and who performs political and administrative duties. Although the term *sceriffa* was an inaccurate translation also adopted by the Italian press, Muslim notables who claim to be descendants of the Prophet employ the latter term to evoke the prestige of their family genealogy. In fact, along with her relatives who led the Khatmiyya order, she claimed to be a descendant of the Prophet. Other Italian sources such as Italian newsreels and travel literature expressively employed the term *Santona* ('holy woman'), pointing to her charismatic character. Finally, oral sources in today's Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Egypt draw on the Arabic title of *Sittī* that is an abbreviation of the term *Sayyidātī*, 'my lady' (Bruzzi 2015). This title is widespread not only in the Maghreb but also in Northeast Africa in reference to holy women and *shāykhāt*. In Djibouti and North Somalia its plural, *sittāt*, is employed in reference to sessions of prayers led by a group of women. In other parts of Somalia all along the Juba River the same sessions are known as *Nabi-ammaan* (Lidwien 1996; Declich 2000). *Sittī* 'Alawiyya led sessions of prayers for her African and foreign visitors at her residence (Bruzzi 2015). In addition, her home was close to Massawa, a terminal port for Muslim pilgrims coming from Africa to Mecca and an important trade centre. Her residence was a place for *ziyāra*, or pious visitation, in which not only Muslim communities participated. In fact, as in other Sufi centres and shrines in the region, not all visitors were Muslims.

The shrines were a pilgrimage destination for people of different social, religious, and cultural backgrounds. In Ethiopia pilgrimages to shrines, as holy places of meeting for monotheistic and African religions, represent a

practice in which several local cults come together in the same space. Some are located along the main pilgrimage route where trade and cultural relations entwine. The Eritrean port led Christian pilgrims from Ethiopia to Sinai, across the Nile Valley and Egypt, or across the Red Sea. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem opened the main channel of cultural exchange between Ethiopia and the Mediterranean world (Gascon and Hirsch 1992). In addition, the transit route of Muslim African pilgrims bound for Mecca, across the Red Sea, passed through Massawa. *Sittī* 'Alawiyya's residence was located at this crossroads for pilgrims bound for the holy cities and was in itself a pilgrimage destination. People visited her for several reasons, mainly for blessing because they believed she held *baraka*, a 'beneficent force of divine origin, which causes superabundance in the physical sphere and prosperity and happiness in the psychic order' (Colin 1986). According to oral sources, her charisma allowed her to influence both colonial authorities and people's behaviour.⁷

During the colonial era, which encompassed her entire life, *Sittī* 'Alawiyya's growing popularity began to challenge the authority of the *Mirghanī* representative appointed by colonial authorities and his entourage. In fact, as stated by colonial commissioner Fioccardi, her residence was visited as a religious centre much more frequently than that of her nephew *Sayyid* Ġa'far. The colonial authorities were concerned that this rivalry could give rise to a possible split inside the *Khatmiyya* in Eritrea, and consequently began to interfere in this challenge for the *Khatmiyya* leadership. They forced *sharīfa* 'Alawiyya to officially recognize *Sayyid* Ġa'far as the 'leader of Islam in Eritrea' (Bruzzi 2006). Despite the great respect she enjoyed in the country, *Sittī* 'Alawiyya could not play a political role because under Islamic tradition women were not allowed to do so. In particular, the colonial authorities forbade her to appoint new representatives (Ar. *khulafa'*) of the *ṭarīqa* because they considered this to be a traditional role reserved for male representatives only.

The appointment of *khulafa'* is an interesting point in this issue since there was a discrepancy between the colonial assumptions (based on local male informers such as *Sayyid* Ġa'far and his entourage) and the subsequent behaviour of the *sharīfa*. Colonial data suggests that in contrast to this prohibition, *Sittī* 'Alawiyya began to personally appoint her *khulafa'* in Eritrea. This conduct, denounced by *Sayyid* Ġa'far, was also strongly criticized by the Italian authorities.⁸ It is interesting to note that colonial rule perceived the establishment of a patriarchal system within a Muslim society as necessary to guarantee the *pax coloniale*. The colonial discourse, similar to that of *Sittī* 'Alawiyya's Muslim rivals, believed women's leadership could cause trouble in the colony. A colonial report of a clash in Keren sheds light on the criticism against *Sittī*

'Alawiyya as a female religious leader.⁹ *Sayyid Ġa'far's khalifa* read an indictment text during the Friday prayer in Keren's main Mosque. That event caused serious conflict within the Muslim community in 1917.¹⁰ The document's importance is related to the fact that it sheds light on discourses in that specific context that were mobilized to challenge women's leadership according to the 'Islamic orthodoxy' of her rivals. It included a list of advice and obligations that Qur'an prescriptions delineate for women's conduct, and implicitly accused *Sittī 'Alawiyya* of misbehaviour in order to undermine her leadership. Her name is never mentioned in the text, but it was evident that she was the target of the criticism. The text addressed male audiences attending the Friday prayers in the main mosque and served as an indictment of her religious leadership within the community. It was an attempt to claim, through a religious argument, that her authority was illegitimate. The general criticism was that of *bid'a* or innovation, namely a practice for which there was no precedent in the time of the Prophet, and is considered the opposite of Sunna (Robson 1986). According to the text, this innovation was prohibited. Throughout Islamic history the accusation of violation of *sharī'a* and 'orthodoxy' is utilized whenever a woman assumed a high position (Mernissi 1992). In particular, the text admonishes her followers for moving away from the right way to follow her 'heresy',¹¹ consisting of her growing popularity at the expense of *Sayyid Ġa'far*, the male representative of the *ṭarīqa*. According to the indictment, the authority of a woman should be considered essentially inferior to that of a man. In particular, the accusation concerned certain Islamic worship services that she led and that the text declares illegal and 'heretical' on the basis of some *ḥadīth*.

The main incrimination, as well as one of the crucial points of their challenge, related to her appointment of *khulafa'* (representatives) of the order. This was considered to be an exclusive duty of the leader of the *ṭarīqa*, so it formed the hub of complaint. Other aspects criticized and questioned were related to women's assumption of a public role, a position that contradicted Sunna and 'Islamic orthodoxy'. The latter would foresee a form of segregation for women. According to that rule, Muslim followers should avoid seeing a woman who was not a member of their family. In this way the criticism was indirectly expressed toward all male followers who visited *Sittī 'Alawiyya's* residence. The text appealed to: 'the brothers to avoid women's view, ... to avoid adultery' as well as the sisters to 'avoid men's view ... to avoid adultery: not to show your beauty but to your husband, father, sons, parents-in-law, grandsons ... Not to let them hear your footsteps, not to draw people's attention to your beauty. ... If you (men) ask them (women) something, ask it across a curtain. It will be better for your and their purity of heart.'¹²

According to a *ḥadīth*, *Imāmate* could be forfeited only through apostasy or by neglecting the duty of the *Imām* to provide the communal prayer (Madelung 1971). It was a duty that, according to the indictment, *Sittī* 'Alawiyya could not fulfill. The issue of female *Imāmate* and their access to a mosque has often been associated with a situation of disorder and shame. Ibn Al-Jawzī quotes a *ḥadīth* that states: 'If a woman is afraid to create disorder in men's minds, it is better for her to pray at home'.¹³ The indictment against the *sharīfa* to take on the role of *Imām* can be understood within this debate. A woman leading prayers in the mosque was not permitted, but this was not the issue since the gathering and prayers were within her residence, not in the mosque. Also, *Sittī* 'Alawiyya led superogatory prayers, not obligatory ones.

It is important to emphasize the fact that the Keren mosque, where the Muslim people gathered and prayed, and where the criticism against *Sittī* 'Alawiyya was mobilized, was built by the Italian authorities. It was primarily a masculine space from which women were banned. At that same time the leadership of *Sīdī* Ġa'far, as the male representative of the Eritrean branch of the Khatmiyya, was established and unquestionably supported by the colonial authorities. In fact, these authorities were in line with the Muslim elite that they tried to co-opt in seeking to restrict *Sittī* 'Alawiyya's influence. Although the rivalry between *Sittī* 'Alawiyya and *Sayyid* Ġa'far continued and no winner identified, they both remained privileged reference points for colonial authorities. They continued to appear in colonial reports and Italian media at colonial ceremonies as representatives of the Eritrean Muslim community. *Sittī* 'Alawiyya's response to the indictment against her was directed toward an emphasis on *Imāmī* esoteric doctrine. According to colonial sources, she claimed to be more suitable as a religious leader than her relative because, according to their family genealogy, she was effectively 'closer to the Prophet' since the founder of the order was *Sittī* 'Alawiyya's grandfather and *Sīdī* Ġa'far's great-grandfather.¹⁴ If the criticism against her used arguments based on gender discrimination, she countered by focusing on her belonging to the category of *walī*, a person close to God, so that her sex should not be an issue.¹⁵ Unlike *Sīdī* Ġa'far, *Sittī* 'Alawiyya was recognized as *wālī*.¹⁶

Since her leadership was questioned on the basis of gender discrimination within 'Islamic discourse', her response utilized the same basis. In response to this attempt to undermine her leadership she began to progressively assert her authority by embodying Islamic orthodox practices. In particular, she wore special trousers under her traditional dress as well as a *ḥiḡāb* that covered her hair, ears, and chin. This practice of covering herself was instrumental in her empowerment and in allowing herself to assume a public and political role in the colony as a Muslim authority.

Sufi *shāykh*'s way of dressing is very meaningful. In some cases it can be considered as a further expression of the unity of believers, the principle of the *tawḥīd*. The use of both Christian and Islamic symbols expresses the inter-religious dimension of Sufi practices that are widespread in Ethiopia. In one image *Sitti* 'Alawiyya appears in a very emblematic dress. It is the most widespread portrait of her in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The same image was used in a book published in Italy during the fascist period (Caniglia 1940). In this image *Sitti* 'Alawiyya appears to be wearing a special veil that she wore even during official events organised by the Italian colonial authorities in the country. It is a special *ḥiǧāb* similar to that used by Catholic nuns, but recalls both Christian and Islamic symbols and values. As Sirhindī, a Naqshbandī master, claimed: '*Tarīqat* (the mystical way) and the *shāri* 'at [the Islamic way that designates rules and regulations governing the lives of Muslims] are identical. They don't differ even by the thickness of a hair. Everything that is in opposition with the (Islamic) Law has to be refused and every belief that contrasts with it is heresy. The Perfect being looks for the Truth holding himself to the Law' (Ventura 1990).

Sitti 'Alawiyya emphasized this concept by wearing this particular veil, promoting the integral and strict observation of Islamic obligations claimed by her rivals concerning the covering of women's bodies. Expressing a rigorous Islamic orthodoxy in her dress, she defended her public role and visibility as that of a political mediator between the local people and colonial authorities. By wearing a veil that recalls those used by Catholic nuns, the *Sharīfa* seems to be addressing and appealing to Christian believers as well such as the Italian colonial authorities, accomplishing the mission to 'call' (*da 'wat*) beings to the truth (Ventura 1990). A Mirghanī family oral tradition reports that when the Italian authorities invited her to visit the Christian Cathedral in Asmara, they asked her to sit on a throne and called her 'Santa 'Alawiyya' (Saint 'Alawiyya).¹⁷ In her family tradition there was no distinction between Muslims and Christians.¹⁸ Throughout the colonial rule her influence in the social and political life of both Muslim and Christian people became progressively more and more relevant in the colony.¹⁹

Toyiba Sirāǧ: The Custodian of the Shrine of Teru Sina in North Eastern Ethiopia

This section presents the case of a contemporary Sufi shrine in North Eastern Ethiopia based on ethnographic research conducted at the shrine of Teru Sina. Ṭoyibā is the contemporary custodian of the former Sufi centre of learning

(*zāwiya*) and of a contemporary Sufi shrine named Teru Sina. Before proceeding to the major contentions of the paper, a brief note on the establishment of the shrine will be presented for the purpose of providing some basic background information about the shrine and also on the first generation preceding the custodianship of Toyība Sirāḡ.

The shrine of Teru Sina is located in Oromo nationality zone (ONZ). It was founded by a Sufi *shaykh* of the Amhara national Regional State (ANRS), in the ḡille Dhmuḡa district, at Arba Wayu *qabale*. Toyība's father, Sirāḡ Muḡammad, was born around 1885 in Yaḡḡu, in today's northern Wollo zone, in the village named Guāḡur. *Shaykh* Sirāḡ joined a number of Islamic centres of learning in Dana, Iraf Libe in Northern Shewa, at Geddo, and at Shonke in Southern Wollo where he studied Islamic theology. Sirāḡ belonged to the Qādiriyya brotherhood, which was the dominant brotherhood in Wollo around the late nineteenth to twentieth centuries (Trimingham 1952, Hussein 2001).²⁰

Sirāḡ was initiated into the order by the famous *shaykh* Muḡammad Yassin of Yaḡḡu, as can be seen in the following *silsila*²¹ that traces Sirāḡ's initiation history back to the founder of the Qādiriyya order, 'Abd al-Qādir al-ḡilānī of Baghdad.



Shaykh Muḥammad Adem initiated the mentor of Sirāḡ *shaykh* Muḥammad Yassin

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Shaykh Muḥammad Yassin initiated *shaykh* Sirāḡ Muḥammad

Silsila (chain of mystical transmission) of *shaykh* Sirāḡ
(Source: Author's field notes)

In his long spiritual journey *shaykh* Sirāḡ further studied *nahw* (Arabic grammar) for six months at the *zāwīya ziyāra* of Sakina, where he studied under the auspices of *Mufti* Muhammad Aman Abdella (1894-1978), a graduate of Al-Azhār University in Cairo.²² In 1926 Sirāḡ moved to the Qallu province where he was hosted by the Sufi *shaykh* Ali Muamin, and where he established his own small centre of learning. Sirāḡ taught there for five years. During his teaching, he built a good reputation for his competence in Islamic knowledge. Many students from different parts of Wollo who had heard of his fame flocked to the centre. Sirāḡ subsequently established his own *zāwīya* for regional *ziyārāt* at Mekdessa and Alala. He finally settled in Teru Sina where he established a regionally reputed *zāwīya*.

Sirāḡ's prominence and fame came in the post-Italian invasion (1936-1941) period. During the Italian invasion the colonial authorities imprisoned him for his loyalty to the imperial government. This was one of the few instances of imprisonment of Muslim religious leaders since the Italian period marked relatively better though short-lived political recognition for Ethiopian Muslims (Sbacchi 1985, Haggai 2007). After the Italians' departure in 1941 and on the return of the emperor from exile, Emperor Haile Selassie rewarded Sirāḡ for his patriotism and loyalty. The rewards he obtained included a land grant in the Batho district, financial and material support for the construction of a mosque in Mekdessa, and an invitation to the national palace to celebrate the return of Eritrea in 1950.²³ According to archival research conducted at his shrine in Mekdessa, the emperor also fully sponsored Sirāḡ and five students on a *ḥāḡḡ* in 1960. Sirāḡ later established other centres of learning at places such as Chafa Robit, Jabaruhman, Chiri, Karakore, Alala, and Teru Sina, which are all located in today's North Shewa and Oromo Nationality zones of Amhara national regional state. All of the sites in which *shaykh* Sirāḡ established a *ziyāra* are locally referred to as *yā ḡinn marabiya* (breeding places of the *ḡinn*), indicating that malevolent spirits (*ḡinn*) were at the centre of *shaykh* Sirāḡ's proselytization missions.

Sirāḡ's shrine at Teru Sina was built in 1949. Teru Sina was one of the hot spots for ethnic conflict between the Oromo and the Amhara in the late 1930s

and early 1940s (Meron 2010, 2015). The reasons for these struggles ranged from territorial hegemony, clashing livelihood strategies (the Amhara were sedentary farmers and the Oromo agropastoralists), to cultural (killing for honour) and political issues. Local governors' attempts to end the conflicts did not succeed; they then approached the local religious leaders and traditional authorities as a way of reaching the conflicting parties and instigating peace talks. As part of this pragmatic strategy, Sirag was approached by local state agents and he preached intensively about the value of peace to both groups. His successful reconciliation opened a new chapter in his life. Sirag's successful settlement of the protracted Amhara-Oromo conflict earned him respect from the government and the community at large. He was rewarded with land grants and financial support for constructing his *ziyāra* on his settlement at Teru Sina, and people seeking justice began to flock to this new *ziyāra* in large numbers. This *ziyāra* obtained recognition and support from the government and became a regular weekly court hearing where local people brought their cases to the *ziyāra*. During *shaykh* Sirag's time the judges were four Muslim local clerics.²⁴ The same people also served as teachers at the *ziyāra* and were well versed in Islamic education. In fact, *Yā Šəykoč čilot* was then attached to the *zāwīya*. *Shaykh* Sirag and his co-workers combined religious authority with a legal title.

Sirag's legacy relates to the way he sought to redefine most of the religious practices of the traditional Oromo belief and spirit possession cults, widely practiced in the area within the framework of Sufi Islam. These practises include *Wadaḡa*, which was redefined as *ḍikr*; *tālāma* redefined as *māwliḍ*, and *Zār* as *ḡinn*. Religious practices such as the Oromo goddess of fertility (*atee-tee*) that could not be redefined within the framework of Šūfi Islamic tradition were not only rejected but also actively campaigned against. Sirag accented the Islamic identity of the *zāwīyāt* he had established at various places until he finally settled permanently at Teru Sina. He passed away in October 1972. Up to the time of his death he was held in high esteem and revered by many as the *yā-salam abbat* (father of peace).

Sirag's body was buried in a mausoleum constructed at his centre in Teru Sina. There are biennial visits (*ziyārāt*) to his shrine on August 15 and in October. His only daughter, Toyība Sirag, took over the responsibility of administering the centre as a *khalifa* (successor) of her father, due to the fact that she was Sirag's only biological daughter. This blood tie made her the legitimate heir to the office. Toyība describes the resistance she faced from her relatives and her father's former students (*dārāsas*) as follows:

The *dārāsas* (students) of my father and his male relatives did everything in their power to stop me from taking over the custodianship of the shrine. They have accused me of being the supporter of the impe-

rial regime and accused me of being a feudal who owns plots of land in different parts of the country and who exploits people. Their accusation was partly successful in a way that I was imprisoned for a short time by the Derg regime and that the military junta confiscated most of the land. Upon my release and when they came to realise that I took over the custodianship of the shrine they started another campaign of accusing me of breaking the Islamic principles of inheritance, which in their account refutes women from inheritance rights. Even though I did not have the Islamic knowledge on issues of inheritance their earlier sabotages were informative enough to get a sense of their sick intentions, which they wanted to frame in religious terms.

The initial resistance came from Toyība's nephew Ahmad, who claimed to be the legitimate male heir. His main argument was that Toyība was too young and incompetent to take over the leadership role. Even though Ahmad emphasized the age factor, Toyībā was actually one year older than he was. The *dārāsa* of Sirāḡ were the other contenders to her accession. Their arguments were mainly framed in religious terms, emphasizing the point that she was too illiterate to take over the mentorship of the centre of learning based at the shrine. One key informant and a contemporary *dārāsas*²⁵ of the Sirāḡ who came to the shrine for a pilgrimage in August 2010 described this common narrative: 'Toyība has inherited the office through her biological line of descent and through her blood tie to Sirāḡ, but unfortunately that does not qualify one to be an '*alīm*' (knowledgeable person). She has the right blood and not the right '*ilm*'. She did not study Qur'ān, thus how would you expect the former students of ḥāḡḡ Sirāḡ to stay here in the absence of a knowledgeable person?' Another informant echoed this point: 'Women are good for domestic duties and not for religious education, which requires knowledge. When his daughter Toyībā succeeded many left, looking for other *zāwiya* where they can get '*ilm*' from knowledgeable '*alīm*'.

According to the dominant narrative of male informants, the rupture in the religious education at the centre, which once attracted students from different parts of the Horn of Africa, relates to his daughter's succession and contemporary position as custodian of the shrine. According to this account, ḥāḡḡ Sirāḡ, unlike his daughter Toyība, is said to have religious knowledge and hence cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), which his daughter lacked. This is said to account for the failure to sustain the religious studies that were offered at Sirāḡ's former centre of learning in Teru Sina. Some informants who argue along this line mentioned that after his death many *dārāsa*-s left due to Toyība's incompetence in conducting Islamic education at the centre. As one informant and a former student of the Sirāḡ described it, 'The death of our *shaykh* and the

succession of a woman have both contributed to the death of 'ilm (knowledge) at Teru Sina'.²⁶ To counteract this resistance, Toyiba networked with other prominent *shaykhs* in the region who had good relationships with her father. She requested their help in teaching at the centre. As a way of appeasing the regular *Yā Šaykoč čilot* Toyiba nominated three of Sirāḡ's former *dārāsas* who stayed at the shrine and one of her eldest sons as the new mediators for settling disputes.

The recent trends of resistance to Toyiba relate to *Sittī* 'Alawiyya being accused of unorthodoxy. During the extensive fieldwork conducted at the shrine, one of the issues often emphasized by informants related to the elements of change in the nature of religiosity between the first and second generations. Informants often referred to elements of contemporary religious practices described by Islamic reformist movements such as the *Jamaat Ansar al-Sunnah* as being 'unorthodox'. This paper analyzes two of the contemporary religious practices that have been described as witnessing syncretic religious practices in the second generation of the shrine. The selection of these variables for detailed discussion and analysis mainly draws on the dominant emic accounts of informants who have stressed these practices as best illustrating the changes and 'new' aspects of religious practices compared to the times of ḥāḡḡ Sirāḡ. These elements are the group prayer (*Wadāḡā*) and the *Zār hādrā*.

Wādāḡa, one of the regular weekly religious rituals held at the shrine of Teru Sina, is the traditional Oromo communal prayer of the *Wadāḡā* that Sirāḡ once redefined as *dikri*. Scholars have widely discussed the fact that this ritual is pre-Islamic and is associated with traditional Oromo beliefs. According to Trimingham, 'Wadāḡā is the chief religious act among the Oromo of Wallo and it is the family or communal prayer gathering' (1952: 262). Similarly, Muhammad (1994), Kelkilchew (1997), and Hussein (2001) describe *Wadāḡā* as a traditional Oromo group prayer. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Sufi reformists targeted the ritual of the *Wadāḡā* (Hussein 2001). Sirāḡ appropriated the *Wadāḡā* as *dikri* while others vigorously sought to eradicate *Wadāḡā*. The *Wadāḡā* ritual takes place on a weekly basis at most Sufi shrines in the region and at the contemporary shrine of Teru Sina. During the days of *shaykh* Sirāḡ the *dikri* was mainly attended by his Muslim *dārāsa*, some Islamic scholars who taught at his *zāwiya*, and Muslim residents of the area. Currently there are no restrictions and hence Muslims, Christians, and adherents of traditional belief attend the weekly *Wadāḡā*. The themes of the prayer at the weekly *Wadāḡā* range from seeking remedies for illness to praying for peace, success in careers, and a good harvest. The change in the ritual of the *Wadāḡā* in the second generation is evident in the decline of the *dikri*.

In most cases the participants of the weekly *Wadāḡā* come with small gifts such as *Čat*, incense or coffee. Throughout the prayer the attendants chew *Čat* and coffee is frequently served to the *balā Wadāḡā* (attendee of the *Wadāḡā*). In addition to the main weekly group *Wadāḡā*, there are minor individual *Wadāḡās* held for individual *bala Hāḡās* (someone with personal problems). During Siraḡ's time a group prayer was held at the different centres in Maqḡassa, Teru Sina, and Alala. One key informant who was a former Dārāsa of Siraḡ described this ritual:

During the days of Siraḡ there was only dikri. He even used to criticize other centres hosting *Wadāḡā*. He was against the consumption of *Čat*, slaughtering of animals for worship. He used to preach about Islam and about these pious Muslims. But today, we see unemployed young boys in the village coming to the shrine for refreshment. They have no idea about the message being conveyed. They have memorized the words of the *Menzuma* without internalizing the meaning. Today people come here only to chew *Čat* and get high (*la mirqana*). (Adem Nuri, 7 May 2009, Teru Sina)

After Siraḡ's death this weekly group prayer, which locally is referred to as a *Wadāḡā*, continued to exist. Unlike the earlier communal prayer mentioned above, the contemporary *Wadāḡā* at the Sūfī shrine is referred to by some as an element in the shift to unorthodox religious practises under Toyība's administration. According to the research conducted at the shrine of Teru Sina, the majority of the participants of the *Wadāḡā* at the shrine, about 80 percent, are Christians.

The main criticisms raised against the nature of this group prayer are based on two main issues; first, prayers are addressed directly to ḡāḡḡ Siraḡ rather than to Allah. This is described as an element that contradicts the basic tenet of Islam, namely the *tawḡīd* (the doctrine of oneness of God). Addressing the prayers to Siraḡ is claimed to be an aspect of heresy and the deification or worship of anyone other than God. The second criticism regards the content of the prayer as having an altruistic interest and materialistic aspiration in contrast to the time of Siraḡ when it was focused on the afterlife. According to one informant, 'During his time, the prayers focused on prayers for the afterlife but after his death the topics of the prayer focus more on matters related to the temporal world and its earthly concerns'. The reasons are framed as being directly related to the fact that the current custodian of the shrine is a woman who is not knowledgeable enough to lead adherents along the right path. Informants

also emphasized new additions (*bid'a*) that, in their view, began to emerge in and around the shrine in the post-Sirağ period.

The other ritual used as evidence of the shift in the nature of religiosity at the shrine relates to the weekly *Zār hādrā*. As in the case of the *Wadāḡā*, the *Zār hādrā* is a weekly ritual that takes place on Mondays. It is attended by possessed women who come together for the purpose of appeasing their possessing spirits, a session of prayer, chanting, singing, and dancing (Meron 2010a). According to informants, this is described by many as a new addition that came into existence due to the 'loose' leadership of Toyība. Both Christians and Muslim *Zār* adepts participate in the weekly *Zār hādrā* ritual. Toyība is possessed by six different types of *Zār*, *Tequar*, *Kibrit*, *Wāsān-Galaw*, *Attete*, *Tākolash*, and *Adal-Moti*. Her four daughters, Sofia (aged 58), Aminat (55), Rabiya (53), and Kediḡa (45), are also possessed by different spirits. One of *Sirağ's* great-granddaughters is possessed by two different *Zār* spirits and is married to a Christian spirit medium. There are different narratives of how a spirit possession cult spread in and around the shrine and how the daughter and granddaughters of *Sirağ* came to be possessed by *Zār* spirits. The following account by Toyība's son is shared by many:

Once Fana Dāsta [the wife of shāykh *Sirağ*] went to Kara Qore town for the weekly market. When she left her house, she did not pray the first daily obligatory prayer, the *Faḡr*. This was against the teachings of her husband, shaykh *Sirağ*, who used to preach about the five pillars of Islam and who used to emphasize the need to observe the obligatory daily prayers. He used to warn his family that they would be penalized for such an act, as anyone else would. If you look at the hadith, the Prophet Muhammad, who dearly loved his only daughter Fatima, once called her and informed her that she could ask him for anything he could offer on this earth but not for the day of the judgment.²⁷ The ḡinn servants of *Sirağ* who still patrol his shrine after his death were disappointed with his wife's failure to pray the *Faḡr* prayer and failing to observe her religious obligation as a Muslim. She was afflicted by the ḡinn on that very day. Furthermore, the affliction of our sisters and our mother is related to the gomi (grudge) the ḡinn had on the family. The ḡinn have suffered a lot during the days of our grandfather who used to punish and chase them out. The ḡhave as it is stated in the holy Qur'an have a longer life span than human beings. When our grandfather died they started their retaliation for this was the time when our family became Ḡasi (ignorant) of the basic tenets of Islam to the extent of not praying the obligatory daily prayer. You see women get afflicted for not knowing the right way. In the Qur'an it is clearly

stated which cases call for the anger of the *ğig* and an attack by it. (Izudin Muhammad, 5 April 2009, Teru Sina)

In this narrative leaders of the shrine simultaneously recognize the punitive power of *ğinn* even over members of the family of *shaykh* Sirağ, but redefine the new power the *ğinn* acquired within an Islamic framework. Here *ğinn* are no longer the 'slaves' of Sirağ but also vanguards of Islamic orthodoxy. The justification of syncretic religious practices occurs in reference to not just a vague orthodoxy but rather to a radical monotheism mentioned in the Qur'an.

This ritual is highly criticized for being non-Islamic. Many of the informants' criticisms of the *Zār hādrā*, and the *Wadāğā* are often framed as related to Toyibā's poor leadership and incompetence. As a counternarrative Toyibā stresses the fact that her father accommodated *ğinn*:

My father had power over the *ğinn*. He had *ğinn* servants who used to serve him day and night. That was due to his 'ilm and the fact that he was a *wāli* chosen by Allah. In our case, we also have different knowledge and power over the *ğinn*, which men tend to downplay. I am a *bala Wuqābi* who know and foresee things. The source of knowledge of the *bala Wuqābi* is Allah. The *bala Wuqābi* acknowledges the supremacy of the *wāli* the saint and in this case that of Sirağ. The saint is believed to be the one who monitors whether the former uses the power bestowed upon him. 'Power abuse' by *bala Wuqābi* is believed to have severe consequences. To ensure 'accountability', other *bala Wuqābi* who are under me including men *bala Wuqābi*, are expected to 'renew' their 'knowledge license' by visiting the descendants of a *wāli* and by offering one-tenth of their income to me as a leader and custodian of the shrine. So in a way we are also having the upper hand over the *ğinn* even though the level is different to that of my father.

The above account hints at one of the main characteristic features of this generational transformation: the way the *zāwiya* has evolved from being a centre of exorcism and domestication of non-Islamic spirits to their accommodation and resurgence, a process described in this work as a shift from domestication and exorcism to accommodation and adorcism. Initially Sirağ was engaged in exorcism of spirits but over time he redefined the spirits as the *ğinn*²⁸ of the Islamic faith. He sought to harness their spiritual energy to facilitate conversion of the local population to Islam. This new semiotic space has created a favourable atmosphere for the formation of more syncretistic religious practices under an Islamic framework during the second generation.²⁹

As a counternarrative to this dominant trend of debating the orthodoxy of the religious practises at the shrine, Toyība appropriates the latest discourse of dichotomisation of Muslims in Ethiopia, a trend adopted by the government. Such dichotomisation of 'good' and 'bad' Islam is best reflected in the phrase that describes the Sufi as *hager bekel islimina* or 'home-grown Islam', and the reformers as *akrari* or 'extremist'. This relates to global and regional geopolitics and the Ethiopian ruling party's (EPRDF) effort to secure Islam. This dichotomization is used extensively by Sufi leaders as a way of justifying their religious orthodoxy in a way that hints at autochthonous claims. Like the case of Sittī 'Alawiyya, the dominant perception at the current Sufi shrine of Teru Sina emphasizes the elements of change that resulted from the fact that women took over the custodianship of the Sufi centres.

Conclusion

The figures of Sittī 'Alawiyya and Toyība contrast with the dominant portrait of passive, invisible, and anonymous Muslim women in Northeastern African societies. The latter is crossed by fragmentary traces and apparently isolated stories of several leading feminine religious personalities. A paucity of primary and secondary written sources on Sufi women leaders in the Horn of Africa has led us to adopt a historical-anthropological approach. This shed light on the significant role Sufi women are playing as custodians of shrines in the Horn of Africa. The juxtaposition of historical and ethnographical studies allows us to explore and underline some leitmotifs as well as local specificity concerning Sufi women's leadership role in the region. As in the case of their West African counterparts like Nana Asma'u (1793-1864) of the Sokoto caliphate and the Murid *khalifa* Sokhna Magat Diop, both Sittī 'Alawiyya and Toyība are successors of their fathers and have managed to emerge as prominent religious figures in the region. This allows them to inherit both cultural and socioeconomical capital. However, these dominant trends of women's inheritance of leadership through bloodline does not overshadow the exceptional cases in which women gain leadership on the basis of their *'ilm* or their spiritual qualities, as in the cases of Mana Sittī Habib Jamaladdin (1810/11-1919), commonly called Dada Masiti. In fact, power and religious authority are intermingled with knowledge. As can be seen from both cases, potential female leaders are not trained in the same way as male members of Sufi orders. Furthermore, unlike Nana Asma'u, no literary production is available on them. It appears that Sufi oral literature and everyday religious practices play a crucial role in handing down Sufi knowledge among women in the Horn. In addition, it is through the embodiment

of Sufi knowledge, such as in the case of the *Zār hādrā* and the *Wadāḡā* practices, that their religious leadership is asserted. This partly explains the rarity of available primary and secondary written records and the need to pursue historical-anthropological research to shed light on their leading role. The life accounts of the two mystics presented above show how the strong patriarchal system and existing social norms affect women's religious leadership. The dual minority position they hold as a female in a patriarchal society and one of the few female religious leaders in Ethiopian and Eritrean Sufism makes their untold stories informative in regard to the existing gendered discourses. The resistance to their accession to custodianship was framed discursively either as relating to their lack of religious education or in connection to their sex preventing them from running a religious office. The analysis of such debate sheds light on some criticism that is commonly mobilized in Islamic rhetoric to challenge religious authority, not only feminine. Among these we find the common contention between blood heirs, spiritual heirs, and scholarly heirs. A second issue concerns 'unorthodox practices' performed at Sufi shrines. In these religious centres these women are portrayed as leading groups of prayer and incorporating local elements within Islamic practices. In particular there is a stress on what is a common and widespread dialectic between 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy', or 'Islamic tradition' and 'innovation'. In both cases their religious leadership appears to be a target for external critics aiming at delegitimizing their authority on the basis of a gender-based discriminating discourse. This has also been one aspect accounting for the syncretic religious practices being practiced at shrines as being a change brought about by women's leadership positions. As in other parts of the world, the debate over Islamic orthodoxy in the region under study revolves mainly around religious practices based at Sufi shrines that became the targets of reformist movements. These practices include saint cults, which are said to be contradictory to Islam's monotheism; pilgrimages to various shrines; celebration of the birthdays of Prophet Muhammad and other Sufi *shaykhs*; memorial feasting held for deceased individuals (*sadaqa*); and elements related to spirit possession. These practices have been refuted by the Salafis and legalists as aspects of *shirk* (associating other beings with God), and as deviations from the true faith.

This paper has gone beyond the dominant trend of silencing the general Sufi counternarratives in response to authenticity claims by the Islamic reformist movements, and the attacks on Sufi women in particular. As this paper points out, female Sufi leaders have actively adopted different strategies to face the critiques of their religious orthodoxy, using different mechanisms to challenge their rivals' prescribed roles in Islam. These elements involve the embodiment of 'orthodoxy' in line with Sufi traditions, as in the Eritrean case study in which

Sittī 'Alawiyya veiled herself. These creative countermoves by Sufi female figures can be compared with the experience of Marabout women who create authority in the frame of Sufi exoteric knowledge (Gemmeke 2008). The female Sufi figures argue that *bale Wuqābi*, the people who lead the *zar* cult as in the case of Toyība, are individuals who have a higher capacity to know and foresee things. As such, *bale Wuqābi* is '*awaqi*' (knowledgeable). The source of knowledge of the *bale Wuqābi* is Allah.

The historical case of Sittī 'Alawiyya is based on official colonial sources and informers who belong to the male Islamic educated local elite. The latter based its criticism of her religious authority on Qur'an prescriptions and theological interpretations. Sittī 'Alawiyya's reaction was to stress her spiritual superiority as a *wāli*, and to adopt a more rigorous and orthodox moral behaviour. Her dress and veil became the way of gaining legitimacy in the public arena and incorporating her counternarrative. The ethnographical data shows how Toyība and the former students of Sirağ have capitalized on the government's promotion of and cooperation with Islamic institutions believed to be moderate, mild, and tolerant.

The issue of interfaith practice is a common trend in both shrines. Christians' and Muslims' attendance at their residences and shrines are associated with the intermingling of African, Christian, and Muslim symbols, practices, and spiritual traditions. Sufi women employ a language that addresses all believers, embodying cosmopolitanism in locations characterized as potential hot spots for conflict and crossroads of different religious and cultural traditions. By juxtaposing the two case studies, this paper sheds light on the critical issues and challenges that female custodians of Sufi shrines faced and continue to face in the region, from both Islamic reformists and patriarchal hegemonic settings. Both cases show that this strategy also passes through a co-optation of the government's political power in order to seek support for their religious authority. One difference regarding their hierarchical position in their orders is notable: unlike Toyība who considered herself as *khalifa*, Sittī 'Alawiyya challenged for the leadership of the *tariqa* and appointed her own *khulafa*'. However, both women resorted to Sufi embodied knowledge and spiritual traditions to assert their religious leadership as custodians of the shrines.

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Notes

- 1 For a genealogy of the family see Hofheinz 1992. After Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Uthmān completed the study of Islamic sciences, he became interested in Sufism and was initiated into five *ṭuruq*, the Naqshbandiyya, the Qādiriyya, the Shādhiliyya, the Junaydiyya, and the Mīrghaniyya, that of his grandfather. For a biography on Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghani (1793-1853) see Grandin 1984. On Ahmad ibn Idris and Idris Tradition see O’Fahey 1990; Thomassen and Radtke 1993. After the death of his master, Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Uthmān founded the Khatmiyya, the seal (*khatm*) of all *ṭuruq*.
- 2 On Sayyid Hāshim see Grandin 1988; Miran 2012, 2009; O’Fahey 1994. See also S. Bruzzi, ‘Jihād, sufi e colonialismo in Africa sub-Sahariana. Il caso della Khatmiyya in Eritrea’ (Università di Cagliari: Tesi di dottorato, 2011).
- 3 See, for example, Caniglia, Giuseppe, *La Sceriffa di Massaua (La Tarica Katmia)*, Roma, Cremonese Libraio Editore, 1940, pp. 33-35 and colonial report by Fioccardi: Cheren, 6 settembre 1917, Colonia Eritrea, Commissariato di Cheren, Riservato-Urgente, Al Signor Reggente il Governo della Colonia. Oggetto: Grave dissidio seguito da ingiurie tra Morgani e Scerifa. Archivio Eritrea pacco 1022, Roma.
- 4 AE (Rome), 1911-1912 Pacco 608 Guerra italo-turca, Fasc. 2 Azione di Morgani.
- 5 Silvia Bruzzi’s interview with Ahmad al-Mīrghani, descendant of Sharīfa ‘Alawiyya and nephew of Ja’far al-Mīrghani and with his mother Sharīfa ‘Alawiyya, descendante de Sharīfa ‘Alawiyya and daughter of Ja’far al-Mīrghani, Cairo, Mai 2009.
- 6 Interview of Sartu with Ṣayḥ Kamāl ibn Hāji Muḥammad, Agarfa, novembre 2012, cit. in Sartu Shemsuddin’s unpublished Master thesis « The Harro Shaykhs’ collection, with annotated translation of astronomy manuscript », Addis Ababa University, June 2013. Regarding Sitti ‘Alawiyya’s role during the war in Ethiopia see: Bruzzi, Silvia, “A Feminine icon for Muslim ‘emancipation’. Colonial propaganda and oral memories of Italian pro-Islamic policy in Ethiopia (1936-1941)”, Unpublished paper for the seminar Contesting Archives: Colonial and oral sources in Northeast Africa, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Bergen University, 8 Mai 2014.
- 7 Silvia Bruzzi’s interview with Ahmad al-Mīrghani, descendant of Sharīfa ‘Alawiyya and nephew of Ja’far al-Mīrghani and with his mother Sharīfa ‘Alawiyya, descendante de Sharīfa ‘Alawiyya and daughter of Ja’far al-Mīrghani, Cairo, Mai 2009.
- 8 Archivio Eritrea (Rome), p. 1022, *Telegramma espresso di servizio*, Commissariato Regionale di Cheren, 4 settembre 1917.
- 9 Ibidem.
- 10 Archivio Eritrea (Rome), p. 1022, settembre 1917, Arabic manuscript with Italian translation.
- 11 In the Italian colonial translation it’s used the term “heresy” to translate the Arabic term *bid’a*. According to Robson (“*bid’a*”, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, cit.), *bid’a* is to be distinguished from “heresy”.
- 12 Archivio Eritrea (Rome), p. 1022, settembre 1917, Arabic manuscript with Italian translation.
- 13 Ibn Al-Jawzī, *Kitab Ahkam al-Nisa’iyya*, Beirut 1981, cit. in Fatima Mernissi, *Le Sultane dimenticate*, (Ibid.), p. 109.

- 14 Archivio Eritrea (Roma), p. 1022, *Telegramma espresso*, Commissariato Regionale di Cheren, 2 settembre 1917.
- 15 Regarding the gender attributed to a *walī*, it is interesting to cite a statement by the famous *ṣūfī* master Farād-ud-Din'Attar. The latter reported a *ḥadīth* according to which the Prophet claimed 'not to look at a person's outward appearance but rather consider his good actions and his goodwill. All women which mercy and worship practice are accredited to the Court of the Lord the Highest as to the men of elite, we cannot address them as women.' Farid-ud-Din 'Attar, *Le mémorial des saints*, Paris, Seuil, 1976, p. 82.
- 16 Archivio Eritrea (Roma pacco) p. 1022. Cheren, 6 settembre 1917, Colonia Eritrea, Commissariato di Cheren, Riservato-Urgente, Al Signor Reggente il Governo della Colonia. Oggetto: Grave dissidio seguito da ingiurie tra Morgani e Scerifa.
- 17 Silvia Bruzzi's interviews with Ahmad al-Mirghani, descendant of Sharīfa 'Alawiyya, nephew of Ja'far al-Mirghani (Cairo, Mai 2009). Regarding the use of the term "saint" in colonial media see: Istituto Nazionale [1932-37] « Aspetti e ricordi di S. A. R. il Duca degli Abruzzi nel suo viaggio in Abissinia. Rievocazione di Luigi di Savoia, Duca degli Abruzzi », Archivio Luce. Minute 10'07.
- 18 Silvia Bruzzi's interviews with Sharīfa 'Alawiyya, descendant of Sharīfa 'Alawiyya and daughter of Ja'far al-Mirghani (Caire, Mai 2009).
- 19 Silvia Bruzzi's interviews with Ahmad al-Mirghani descendant of Sharīfa 'Alawiyya and nephew of Ja'far al-Mirghani (Cairo, Mai 2009); Khalifa Ahmad, current khalifa al-khulafa' of the Khatmiyya in Keren (Keren, Mars 2009); Sharīfa 'Alawiyya, descendant of Sharīfa 'Alawiyya and daughter of Ja'far al-Mirghani (Cairo, Mai 2009). Regarding her visibility in the political arena see: Bruzzi 2015.
- 20 The Qādiriyyā is one of the Sufi orders founded in the sixteenth century by Abd al-Qādir Jilāni in Baghdad (Braukämper 2004, 115-117). It is the oldest and most widespread Sufi order in Ethiopia (Hussein 2001, 68). The Qādiriyyā order was first introduced to Hārār and then spread throughout the country (ibid.). Analysis of the major narratives and archival evidence about the life and times of Sirāḡ indicate that six major events shaped the contours of his spiritual career and the constitution of his religious authority. The first relates to his mystical birth and presumed genealogical tie to the Prophet Muḥammad and the royal family of Emperor Haile Selassie. The second development relates to his Islamic education and initiation into the Qādiriyya Sufi brotherhood. The third account focuses on how his religious piety earned veneration as a saint by his adherents. This includes his competence in Islamic knowledge, extraordinary power over the ḡinn, a proselytization mission targeting pre/non-Islamic religious practices, his extraordinary power of performing miracles (karāmāt), and other Sufi-related practices. The fourth development relates to his role in dispute settlement, putting an end to the protracted interethnic dispute between the Amhara and the Oromo in the 1930s and 1940s, and how this had helped him to construct a political network with the imperial family. This was a political tie that he managed to convert into economic capital, which in turn buttressed his religious authority. The fifth development relates to his imprisonment by the Italians during their occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1941) and the prestigious social status he earned as a patriot in the postliberation period, which he made use of in expanding his political network with the imperial family. Last but not least is the circumstance surrounding his death and belief in his divine ascent.

- 21 *Silsila* is 'chain of initiation' (Seesemann 2011, 232) the documentation of the authority of a Sufi *Shaykh* or a chain in Sufi genealogy (Werbner 2003, 37).
- 22 *Mufti* Muhammad Aman Abdella was one of five Ethiopians in the twentieth century who studied at Al-Al-Azhār University for years.
- 23 As a result of the UN General Assembly Resolution 390 (v), adopted on 2 December 1950, that established the federation of Eritrea (the former Italian colony) into Ethiopia. The Ḥatmiyya position in this instance was not divergent. In fact, during the period of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Federation, *sīdī* Ġa'far al-Mirghani (b. 1871, d. 1943), leader of the Eritrean 'branch' of the Khatmiyya, accommodated the new political setting and was on good terms with the Haile Selassie government (Bruzzi 2014, 269-270).
- 24 These were Muhammad Bekele, Ali Tessema, *hāḡḡ* Hamza, and Idris Abuna.
- 25 I refrain from mentioning the name of this *darasa* for ethical reasons.
- 26 Informant: *Shaykh* Muhadin Almaw, interview during a *chat* secession, Ṭeru Sina.
- 27 The discourse on the possession of the family of shaykh Sirāḡ refers to Islamic precepts from the Qur'an and the limits of prophetic power, particularly the Prophet Muhammad's injunction to his beloved daughter Fatima to stand on her own on the day of judgment. This is a reference to chapter 26, verse 214 of the Qur'an, which mentions that Prophet Muhammad warned his tribe/relative to fear Allah and follow his instructions in their lives, informing them that on the day of judgment everyone would stand before Allah to be rewarded for his/her deeds (good or bad). Ostensibly, the injunction is made to highlight Islam's monotheistic stance, i.e., the limits of prophetic power and also the absence of the element of nepotism.
- 28 *Ġinn* are defined in the *Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* as 'intelligent creatures made of fire, often invisible they are like humans in their capacity to receive God's word and save it' (Newby 2002, 116).
- 29 Birgit Meyer's (1994) concept of diabolization presents an interesting point. In her study of Ghanaian Protestantism Meyer examines how missionaries' attempt to translate Christianity within the Ewe cultural world resulted in the formation of a syncretic religious tradition. The pervasiveness of the spirit possession cult that developed around the shrine best illustrates the oscillating power relations among the religious traditions.