

## **A Study of a Local Religious Institution among the Sidama of Southern Ethiopia**

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### **Research Background and Purpose**

The study seeks to examine development and current state of a traditional religious institution, among the Sidama of southern Ethiopia. Past research into such institutions has mainly focused on their history and role as religious centers, and on pilgrimages to these centers. But there has been a gap in our understanding of their role in dispute mediation, which in the case of institutions like the one this study looks at, has been of growing significance in past several decades.

This research is about a traditional ancestor veneration institution, *Aabbo* in local parlance, which developed into a religious complex in the past century. It aims at tracing the changes in the role and jurisdiction of religious leaders into priest-judges and approaches the institution as both a religious and legal institution. By doing so, it analyzes how the religious and the judiciary role of the institution are related, and what features distinguish mediation in such a setting from the state and other non-state settings for dispute management.

The Sidama are patrilineal groups belonging to the Cushitic language group, and the population is estimated at 3.5 million. It consists of 13 patrilineal clans. Each Sidama clan has a place that is regarded as its founder's first point of settlement, and an area in Sidama land considered the clan's territory. In most cases, the territory bears the clan's name. It is Sidama custom to honor the grave site of respective clan founders, and the site is believed to be sacred. Members of the clan visit the site to pray and perform sacrifices once in several years. *Aabbo*, the clan founder of two Sidama clans of *Holloo* and *Garbiccho* and whose grave site is central to the religious-legal complex this study deals with, is located in *Wonsho* district 333 km from the capital, Addis Ababa and 58 km from the town of Hawassa. The Sidama lived as independent chiefdoms until 1893 when the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik(1868-1913) conquered the land and incorporated it into the Ethiopian state.

The research approaches the *Aabbo* institution from a historical and contemporary perspective. A historical investigation will consider situation of the institution prior to incorporation of Sidama to the Ethiopian state (pre-1893), ask what happened to the institution in the years when Ethiopia was a monarchy and the

Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) was a state church (until 1974), and situation during the 17 years rule of the Socialist leaning repressive Derg regime and the post 1991 period. I rely both on oral sources and written materials to get the historical data.

This particular field research was carried out to learn about contemporary role of *Aabbo* in both religious and non-religious sphere of local life. To understand how people utilize the religious center for dispute mediation, I gathered data on the number and categories of disputants, and the kind of issues mediated, processes for and effectiveness of decisions passed. I was also keen to observe how the religious factor matters at different stages of dispute settlement.

### **Results of the Present field Research**

From May 15 to the end of August, 2009, I carried out fieldwork in the district of *Wonsho* in southern Sidama that has 118,000 inhabitants. I attended and observed Sunday weekly gatherings convening for religious service and dispute settlement, conducted life story interviews with 4 religious leaders and 15 of their ritual assistants at *Aabbo*, and interviewed local residents about their religious life and attachment to the *Aabbo* institution. Below, I present summary of results.

Several kinds of disputes are appealed, but land disputes, debt, theft, and marital disputes were the most frequently appearing types of disputes. Disputants have had different religious, clan and ethnic background. There were Protestants, Orthodox Christians, Traditional and Muslim. Participants came from nearby villages as well as distant places, for instance, from Addis Ababa. This goes against claims in the literature that local institutions such as *Aabbo* tend to have jurisdictions limited by locality and kinship. I also found out that in process of dispute mediation, in addition to religious beliefs and values that emphasize honesty and respect for authority of elders, ritual leaders refer to state law when they find it appropriate. Most of the ritual leaders have had some experience of working in local government offices in different capacities and this has contributed to their knowledge of specific state laws.

Example cases of participants who visited the center for religious services include: those who sought prayers to overcome childlessness, get a good omen in cattle rearing, have better harvest or returns in business ventures. As there are those who wanted help in overcoming challenges, there were those who come to pay tribute in thanksgiving for success in their business and/health. Like the diversity observed in the background of disputants, this group also represented a diverse group of clan, ethnic, religious and geographic backgrounds.

The nature and frequency of disputes reported mirrors trends of change and tension in society. The high frequency of land and cash related disputes, for instance indicate growing scarcity in land and shift in types of crops grown from food crops to that of cash crops.

There are several other players in both the legal and the religious sphere including district courts, village and/or clan elders, church leaders, and local police. And, there are just as many religious denominations too,

as Protestant Churches, Catholic, EOC and Islamic shrines etc. Individual disputants utilize the venues selectively and their preference depends, among other factors, on the nature of the case at hand. For instance, land and marital dispute cases are better settled in settings where respect for custom still weighs heavy than official courts, and cases of theft and indebtedness are better dealt in a setting where fear of divine consequences is felt most intimately.

Likewise, believers use religious venues flexibly and a case by case approach. If they believe vowing a bull to the ancestral spirit of *Aabbo* is more effective to restoring his/her ailing health than a prayer by a priest, they do so, sometimes publicly and in some cases, secretly. From this, it follows that in compiling data on religious distribution in contexts like these, to rely on formal reporting of religiosity could be misleading. One has to ask what rituals does one perform to what end to get a good representation of the diversity, which is one of overlapping affiliations and “mix” than it is usually assumed.

### **Implications and Impact on Future Research**

The results of this fieldwork have widened the scope of the research to consider how religion, custom and state laws are utilized in mediation of disputes by religious leaders, and this directs my attention to local innovativeness not only in area of dispute mediation but also in *Aabbo*'s growing appeal as a religious center to people from different religious, ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds. This departure from a traditionally clan-centered enterprise is worth returning to and further examination.



**Dispute Settlement Scene**



**Elders preparing for a ritual sacrifice**



***Aabbo* Shrine (center); office of one of the priest-judges (Right)**