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AND POWER**

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Competition and Exclusion in Islamic and Non-Islamic Societies: an essay on purity and power

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Abstract

The link between purity and power in African systems of ideas can be direct: one may lose one's (ritual) power, for example, the ability to utter a potent curse or an efficient blessing, by not maintaining a standard of purity, for example by violating a food avoidance rule. Social hierarchies between clans with and without specific ritual or political powers and between professional groups of high and low status are constructed along such lines. In other contexts, the relationship between purity and power is not direct but mediated by moral notions: ritual compliance is seen as an indicator of a moral standard that qualifies a person for political power. Conversely, non-compliance leads to exclusion from power. Competition for the forms of power, which are legitimised in this way, may lead to the rapid rigidification of beliefs and ritual practice. Examples can be found in recent developments within Islam and Christianity. Purity tends to go along with rhetorical exclusion of the "impure".

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1. Introduction

The Rendille, a group of camel nomads in the arid lowlands of northern Kenya, live in a state of intermittent warfare with several of their neighbours. One descent group among them, the Gaalorra, a subclan of the Gaaldeylan clan, has the ability to utter a particularly potent curse against enemies of the Rendille; or, more generally, they have power over enemies. Gaalorra are not only believed to be able to prevent enemies from inflicting harm on Rendille by supernatural means, but also to make these enemies inflict harm on other Rendille. The entire class of subclans among the Rendille who have the power to bless and curse, called *ibire*, of whom the Gaalorra are one, possess particular curse vehicles. One clan is believed to have a ritual association with elephants and if someone is trampled by an elephant, one would attribute this to the curse of that clan. Another clan has a similar relationship with rhinos, a third one with snakes. Gaalorra's curse vehicle is the horse. It might seem strange to find the horse, a domestic animal, in this enumeration of dangerous beasts, but 'horse' here stands for enemy cavalry. In the past, the Boran used to raid Rendille camels on horseback, a rather easy method: you gallop through a herd of camels, the camels stampede and run off with the horses. Here, as in many parts of Africa and beyond, the image of the enemy and oppressor is that of the horseman.

The Rendille do not form one homogenous cultural unit. Many cultural traits we find among them, such as food avoidances, are clan-specific. Gaalorra have more food avoidances than other Rendille and some of them are difficult to keep. The Rendille do not hunt a great deal, but a giraffe stuck in the mud in the rainy season would be slaughtered and eaten by Rendille, with the exception of Gaalorra. These avoid game of any kind. In the past, they also abstained from goat meat, although they do keep goats like all other Rendille, and although goats, just like sheep, are an important source of meat for Rendille, who do not readily decide to slaughter a camel. Gaalorra, however, would only use the milk of goats or sell goats for slaughter, because this avoidance makes them to abstain from goat meat.

What happens if a Gaalorra has succumbed to the temptation and eaten, say, meat of an antelope, which has been shot by illegally the police or other poachers? Nothing conspicuous, one might say. He would not drop dead, nor would he become sick. But he would be believed, and he would believe, to have lost his ritual power, his clan-specific power to bless and to curse. To regain it, he would have to be cleansed. His mouth would have to be rinsed with the urine of uncircumcised boys. If people relapse and are tempted to eat game often, after a couple of repetitions of this cleansing ritual they would rather give up their cursing power.

Taking the Gaalorra case as a starting point, I will move on to wider comparisons and generalisations about “purity and power”². Links between notions of purity and notions of power might exist anywhere on earth, but all my examples are from Africa, including North Africa, because I am an Africanist and know more about that continent than about other continents. Most of what I am going to present for comparison is material from Islamic societies and deals with purity and perfection in different currents of Islam, but I have consciously taken the non-Islamic Rendille as a starting point to show that such ideas are embedded in a much wider context and that there is nothing particularly Islamic about the basic idea of attributing power to those who manage to maintain certain standards of ritual purity.

The results of the following comparisons are:

1. The relationship between purity and power, or to put it differently: standards of ritual performance and forms of entitlement, is rather uniform in otherwise quite different contexts.
2. This relationship can be shown to exist in non-Islamic and Islamic contexts, and within Islam, in Sufi and anti-Sufi currents of Islam alike.
3. It can be accompanied by all sorts of moral reasoning, but moral reasoning is not essential for it. It can also exist without any moral reasons or theological doctrines being attached to it.

2. Other Examples from Non-Islamic Africa

The region immediately bordering the northern Kenyan plains, the southwestern highlands of Ethiopia, provides more illustrations of how purity is linked to power both in the “traditional” belief systems and in the branches of Christianity which have come to compete with them.

Braukämper (1984a) points to the close links between food avoidances and social status in the entire area. More recently, Freeman and Pankhurst (2001) have described how marginalised groups (craftsmen and hunters or former hunters) are denied commensality by the farming communities around them (2001: 5). The pollution emanating from them is believed to have been acquired through their dietary habits. They have eaten “impure” meat, either from hunted animals or from animals that have not been slaughtered in the prescribed way.

² The phrase “purity and power” in the title is, of course, modelled after Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, in an attempt at parasitic publicity. It was suggested by Stephen Reyna.

For the Maale living on the mountain ridge that forms the southern end of the Ethiopian Highlands, “riches and power automatically indexed ritual status” (Donham 1999: 114). Ritual status and, thereby, success in life, associated with it, depended on whether or not “a Maale correctly carried out his or her clan taboos [and] faithfully observed customs (ibid., p. 113).

Such taboos, some clan-specific, others apparently more general, comprise:

- eating finger millet with milk,
- letting breast milk fall on the grinding stone,
- eating from new harvest before it has been tasted by the eldest brother,
- drinking or any other contact with the milk of a cow in a new lactation period if the cow in question is owned by a younger brother and the eldest brother has not yet performed the appropriate ritual,
- eating the honey of bees which first entered a younger brother’s hive, before the eldest brother has tasted from it,
- wrongs like theft and murder.

There is nothing in Donham’s book, which suggests that this list is exhaustive; these avoidances might just be the first examples to have come to his mind. It is, however, significant that all but the last of these taboos have to do with food or rank in the order of eating. In the view of converts, Christianity was the liberation from these taboos (Donham 1999: 115-117).

This emic view is, however, contradicted by an account of a conversion, in which the prospective convert has come to the mission station in order to get medical treatment. He is asked to accept the Christian God first. He does so and is then admonished: “Don’t smoke tobacco. Don’t drink beer. Don’t drink anything that makes you drunk. Food, eat food. Don’t smoke tobacco. Stay away from prostitutes.” (Donham 1999: 111)

For Christians, too, purity has much to do with things that move through the surface of the body, either by ingestion or by intercourse. But at least for the Protestant missionaries of the Sudanese Interior Mission from Canada, about whom Donham writes in the Maale context, the sinfulness of certain kinds of behaviour is mediated by moral or rational considerations. We can assume that alcohol is abhorred by the missionaries because of its intoxicating effect and that prostitution is discouraged because of its adverse impact on public health or on cherished institutions like marriage and the family.

In many belief systems, no such rationalisations and no moral links are required; substances have direct ritual effects. In the case of the Rendille mentioned above, it does not matter

whether the antelope meat was eaten intentionally or inadvertently. Women in New Guinea are expected to go into total seclusion and Muslim women are not allowed to do the ritual prayers or fast while menstruating, without anyone claiming that menstruation is morally bad. A Muslim man, incidentally, who is bleeding from a small wound, would not be allowed to pray either.

To come back to the Maale: both the traditionalists and the Christians among them need to keep standards of purity to preserve their status in their respective groups. And status has to do with wealth and power. Donham reports how Christians support each other in land cases and how Christianity breaks up the power of the seniors.

Among the Konso a little further to the East, Watson (1998: 205) has found that the ubiquitous craftsmen (here called *xawuda*) are considered to be unclean by the farmers and are potentially polluting to persons of ritual importance. In addition to the avoidance of commensality and intermarriage with craftsmen, ritual importance is surrounded by many other rules. Ritual specialists and people with sensitive political roles like peacemakers are called *nama dawra* in Konso, which translates as ‘person for whom things are forbidden’ or ‘person who is forbidden’.

Poqalla are the ritual leaders of the Konso communities and the (formerly real, now largely nominal) owners of the land. The powerful among the *poqallas* do not comprise everyone born into a *poqalla* lineage nor anyone rich enough to qualify as a *poqalla* but only those who have spirits to help them. These powerful *poqallas* are the typical *nama dawra*. How closely their status is linked to ritual purity and to the taboos, which surround them, is best illustrated by how this status is undone. “At the time of the revolution [1974...] the revolutionaries cut off all his [a young *poqalla*’s] hair (it was a taboo even to touch [his] hair) and they forced him to break other taboos by eating with other people and to eat and drink polluting substances such as blood. In this way they destroyed his special physical status of *poqalla*.” (Watson 1998: 261)

Konso who convert to Christianity adopt new standards of purity and become part of other networks of power. Even Protestants follow the widespread Ethiopian custom of only eating meat of animals slaughtered by members of their own group (Watson 1998: 255). A butcher of a different religion would be a source of pollution. Protestants tend to withdraw completely from any rituals associated with the *poqalla*. Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, thought to be closer to local practice and magic, can be combined with participation in traditional rituals and even with the office of *poqalla*. “In the case of the Protestant Church the *poqallas* who converted have given up their *poqalla* role completely. However, it is notable that those who were *poqallas* have often become quite central and powerful in the

church, and hence could be said to have exchanged one set of claims to power with another” (Watson 1998: 253). Following a *poqalla* or belonging to a church are alternative strategies of access to land.

We may interrupt the description of examples at this point to try and identify some of the emerging patterns. All our examples have to do with people seeking access to a resource – here mostly “power”, which is the ability to make other people do what one wants them to do. The desired action may be simply an abstention. One might want others to respect ones rights of access to material resources and not to interfere with them. “Power” in this broad sense includes the Rendille curse, the *poqallas*’ land rights, authority in the new churches. Power is a resource which opens the access to other resources. Between the people and the resource is the ritual requirement they need to meet in order to legitimise access to the resource. In the title of this paper I used the shorthand “purity” for requirements of this type. We can attribute two values to each of these variables (small or high for the number of people, low or high for the ritual requirements, plentiful or scarce for the resources) and combine them in a table to help us to speculate about the scenarios, which result from the different combinations of these values.

Table 1: Explanatory variables and resulting scenarios of inter-group relations

	Number of people striving for access	Requirements for obtaining entitlement	Availability of resource	Resulting scenario
1	small	low	plentiful	Harmony. No problem anticipated. Probably a small group of people has opened a new niche with abundant resources.
2	high	low	plentiful	A bonanza. Many people have access to a resource, which is still plentiful. The situation is unstable, because the resource will be depleted at some point. If the resource in question is power, this means that power will be shared out in smaller and smaller parcels so that ultimately it becomes meaningless.
3	small	high	plentiful	Access to a plentiful resource is unnecessarily restricted. This constellation is not expected to occur frequently in reality.
4	high	high	plentiful	In spite of high numbers seeking access to it, a relatively plentiful resource is protected by high requirements for entitlement. As in case number 3, this is not very likely. Plentiful resources are not normally protected by high requirements for the rights of access, not even if, like in this case, in view of the high number of people seeking access to it, the resource may not remain in rich supply for long.
5	small	low	scarce	The small niche. Few people, who are more or less equally entitled, share a limited resource. Are factors that limit growth at work, like population control?
6	high	low	scarce	A small resource base is free for all and rapidly depleted.
7	small	high	scarce	A small niche in which a limited resource is surrounded by restrictions of access. The situation is somewhat eased by low numbers of contestants.
8	high	high	scarce	Intense competition. Exclusivist strategies like rigidification of norms, discrimination or violence can be expected.
9	constant	low to high	total amount constant, but allocated in proportion to which requirement has been met	<p>Within a group of power holders those who meet the more rigid ritual requirements are those who hold the larger share of power.</p> <p>In a subtype of this scenario the very peak of power holders are exempt from ritual requirements or the breach of a taboo is even expected of them.</p>
10	growing	rising	constant or decreasing	The number of contestants is rising and requirements become more and more rigid.

Numbers 1 to 8 have either high or low values of each variable as the result of systematic permutation. Constellation 8, intense competition for a scarce resource, seems to be particularly frequent in the real world and in this paper we shall find a number of illustrations for it from the older and recent history of Africa.

The mention of land conflicts by Donham and by Watson suggests that among the Maale and the Konso, both of whom are highland farmers, land is a scarce resource and therefore we can assume that a ritual status which gives power over land is also valuable and surrounded by requirements of qualification. We might regard this as an approximation to case number 8.

One point Watson makes about the *poqallas* of the Konso necessitates the inclusion of case number 9 in the above table. Not all *poqallas* have to meet the same ritual requirements, the same standards of purity. Those who meet the higher requirements wield more power. She explains: "There is a relationship between purity and ritual powerfulness and the number and extremity of the taboos is proportional to the importance of the *poqalla*." (Watson 1998: 203). A local *poqalla* obeys certain food avoidances but he may grow food himself. At a higher level *poqallas* may not do so and are only allowed to eat food grown by other members of their own family and prepared by women of their own household. For the more important of these *poqallas* it is specified that these women must be virgins, etc. As we move up the scale of power, taboos become more elaborate and more numerous.

If we consider cases 1 to 8 basic types, 9 and 10 can be referred to as combined types. 10 is a dynamic model of cases 1 or 5 moving towards case 8. We shall come across historical cases of affiliation to a privileged group becoming more contested and the criteria for it more demanding. Looking further afield for comparisons, we might find cases of such correlations between the rigidity of the ritual requirements and the elevation of the status held only exist up to a certain level. At the very peak of a hierarchy rules might be suspended or the breach of taboos may be permitted or even demanded (e.g. the brother/sister marriage, otherwise forbidden in ancient Egypt, being practiced by the Pharaoh, legendary Muslim holy men being married to two wives who are sisters, which is forbidden by the *shari'a* etc.)

The theory implicit in the above table is somewhat macroscopic. It is about quantitative distributions and scenarios. It does not go down to the level of individual decisions. A decision theory about purity and exclusion would have to address questions like: Under what circumstances would an individual tend to adopt an exclusionist rhetoric? Under which circumstances would s/he lean towards an egalitarian ethos / claim minority rights / resort to violence / turn religious, etc. Such a theory could also be developed but would exceed the scope of this paper.

3. Different Levels of Rigidification in Islam

I will now move on to Islamic societies, first to some examples in which Sufism plays a role, then to modern forms of rigidification of Islam that reject Sufism. I will have to disappoint those who expect new explanations attached to these differences: the basic patterns that I find are the same in Sufi and anti-Sufi and even in Islamic and non-Islamic contexts. The rules concerning purity and ritual practice become more demanding as resources (affiliation to a privileged group, political leadership) become more contested, irrespective of the variety of Islamic or non-Islamic beliefs the people in question hold.

The rigidification of ritual requirements for power holders occurs when potential power holders become too numerous and an inner circle is defined to exclude some (case 10 in the above table, which in a minimalist version of the table could also have been omitted, because it is really just a transition from case number 1 to case number 8).

The term 'rigidification' does not sound like correct English to some of the native speakers of that language which I have consulted and the term cannot be found in smaller dictionaries. My computer continues to underline it as wrong. I mean it as a nominalisation of 'to rigidify', if such a word exists, or 'making more rigid'. Let me briefly explain why I feel the need for this unusual term. Islam has repeatedly gone through phases in which the correct performance of ritual detail was emphasised and in which the religion, for its common adherents at least, was broken down into a set of rules. The keeping of these rules was not entrusted to the individual believer but watched over by the state. A certain selective and scripturalist reading of Islam was thus made to penetrate all spheres of life because rules came to apply to all spheres of life.

This process has, in recent writings, often been called 'Islamisation' of a society. But this term, though mostly used by critical writers of a secularist orientation, inadvertently adopts the perspective of the 'fundamentalists' they want to criticise. The latter would also say that everyone who does not share their interpretation of the *shari'a* and their practice of Islam is not a real Muslim and needs 'Islamisation'. But as I am not a theologian but a social scientist, I do not wish to subscribe to this normative concept. I do not wish to suggest by its use that societies which have perceived themselves as Islamic for a thousand years are only now undergoing 'Islamisation'. I do not wish to comment on whether one variety of Islam is better or more Islamic than another. But what I can observe, and what I do not hesitate to state, is that some forms of Islam are more rigid in their dress code and other ritual requirements than others, and I therefore call the process that leads to their emergence and growth 'rigidification'. Another term that I occasionally use in this context is 'intensification'. I like it

for similar reasons: it is close to the descriptive level and relatively free of normative undertones. The two terms, of course, are not synonyms: the intensification of religious belief and practice may, but need not, go along with its acquisition of a more rigid or standardised character.

The terms purity/purification and rigidification here, however, are used as near synonyms. This is not arbitrary or coincidental; in the emic belief systems under study, the ideas of physical cleanliness, ritual purity and obedience to the law are also closely interconnected. From Afazlur Rahman's (1980: 70-74) instructions about how to be a Muslim, we learn that the ablutions are not just a preparation for the prayer but can be regarded as an important part of it. And we have seen above that even the non-Islamic Rendille undo the effects of a breach of a taboo by a kind of washing.

3. 1. *Sufism*

As E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1954) pointed out in *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, Sufism started as a reaction to scripturalist and ritualistic tendencies in mainstream Islam, which left too little room for religious enthusiasm and the ecstatic dimension of religion. From its beginnings Sufism was also influenced by non-Islamic forms of religious ascetism, like that of Christian and Buddhist monks, and possibly by Yoga³. It is, therefore, no surprise that Sufism is capable of going quite far in adjusting to local cultures and in responding to the spiritual needs of people of different pre-Islamic origins.

On the other hand, Sufi *tariiqas*⁴ have also formulated their methods for reaching salvation in mutually exclusive and competitive terms: they have claimed to be the only path to salvation, or at least the one which is a thousand times safer than any other path. Their leaders, especially in 19th century Africa, have demanded an authority, which was only short of prophethood in that they did not call themselves 'prophet'. Claiming that title is, according to the teachings of Islam, not possible after Muhammad, 'the seal of the prophets'. Here we find more and more rigour and an increasingly narrower definition of who is a proper Muslim. Obedience to a Sufi sheikh becomes a prerequisite for being a proper Muslim. 'If you have no other sheikh, the devil will be your sheikh', the saying goes. This development of Sufi movements can be seen as an intensification process, in the course of which they became ritually more elaborate and rigid and politically more demanding of exclusive loyalty.

³ Schimmel 1995 (1985) on the influence of Christianity and Buddhism: 13, on Yoga: 28.

⁴ A *tariiqqa* (literally: 'method') is a religious brotherhood. Purists may forgive the anglicised plural *tariiqas*. The proper Arabic plural is *turuq*.

I will begin here with a short description of a contemporary Sufi community in northern Kenya, which has not gone through such an intensification process: it liberally incorporates pre-Islamic beliefs and practices. Travelling in the Sudan and reading about it, I have not encountered there any other branch of Sufism, which has developed the same degree of syncretism. The closest Sudanese parallels I can think of are the women-dominated *zar* possession cults (Boddy 1989). From this case of a relatively open and heterogeneous community I shall go on to cases where Islam, both Sufi and non-Sufi, is rigidified.

3. 1. 1. The Sakuye Case

Ecstatic religion is linked by some theorists (e.g. I. M. Lewis 1978) to deprivation. The Sakuye example seems to fit this theory. The Sakuye were Oromo-speaking camel herders when they were converted to Islam in the first decades of the 20th century. When the British held a referendum in northern Kenya in 1962 to find out whether its population wanted to belong to Kenya, which was then on the road to independence, or to the newly independent and newly united Republic of Somalia, the Sakuye preferred Somalia, a country of Muslim pastoralists like themselves. Although this was the majority position in northern Kenya, this stretch of country was allotted to Kenya, because negotiations with the Kenyan delegation in London had, by the time the referendum was over, reached a stage which left no room for dividing the territory of the future nation. After independence, the inhabitants of the north and their new central Kenyan masters knew from the start, thanks to the referendum, what to expect from each other, and a civil war, known as the *shifita* emergency, broke out immediately. The camel herds of the Sakuye were machine-gunned. The remainder of the livestock perished when the Sakuye were kept in camps (locally known as “keeps”), the surroundings of which were speedily overgrazed because these camps did not move. There are tales of atrocities and random killings, when treks of Sakuye were marched to the east by their enemies, the loyalist Boran.

In the early 1970s, the impoverished remains of the Sakuye gathered at Dabel, a group of hills below the escarpment of the Ethiopian plateau on the Kenyan side. There was slightly more rain there than in the lower parts of the lowlands and agriculture was just possible, albeit with low returns and high risks. A holy man found underground water and new wells were dug.

Able bodied younger men earned their livelihood by poaching. Some of them died of thirst on the endless plains, trying to smuggle leopard skins into Somalia. Many young men were unable to pay the bridewealth. Had the parents of Sakuye girls insisted on bridewealth, a high proportion of them would have been given to non-Sakuye suitors and many young Sakuye

men would have ended in involuntary celibacy. To avert this situation, bridewealth was abolished and ethnic endogamy was practised for a number of years.

The camel-oriented rituals, which the Sakuye had previously practised in much the same form as the neighbouring Gabbra and Rendille (cf. Schlee 1994: ch. 4), had become meaningless after the loss of the camels. Their still rather nominal affiliation to Islam (to which they may have converted under the pressure of their Somali neighbours) did not satisfy their spiritual needs. The gap was filled by the Husayniyya, a Sufi order named after the legendary Sheikh Hussein (Husayn) of Bale in southeastern Ethiopia (Andrzejewski 1972, 1974; Baxter 1987; Braukämper 1989).

At Dabel, Abba Ganna represented this order. This name means “father of the rainy season”, more specifically, of the spring equinoctial rains, the big rains which also lend their name to the ‘year’, i.e. “father of wealth, father of plenty”. It is an allusion to the title of a hagiography of Sheikh Hussein published in Cairo, *Rabii’ul quluub*, ‘The Springtime of Hearts’.

When I met Abba Ganna in the 1980s, he was an old man of enormous bodily proportions. He lived in permanent seclusion behind a curtain and was accompanied by a son who held a large umbrella to shield him from the sun and from sight when he left his hut. The number of his wives was kept at the legal maximum: four. When he divorced one he immediately took a young bride as a replacement.

The souls of saints can travel across time and space and meet other saints, living and dead. This is well known from Sufi legends from all over the Islamic world. In Dabel, however, at least in popular belief, the Arabic concept of *awliya* (sing. *wali* – ‘holy man, saint’) is mixed with the Boran (Oromo) concept *ayaan* – ‘spirit’ in general, including ‘animal spirit’ (Bartels 1983).

There is a story that once, after the Sakuye had acquired some livestock again, Abba Ganna did not want their camps to move far away from Dabel. Some camps did so nevertheless and were subsequently harassed by lions on the outlying pastures. After they retraced their steps, there were no more problems with large cats. This episode is told as a proof of the ability of Abba Ganna’s soul to communicate with lions or spirit lions.

Abba Ganna’s career fits the classical pattern of a leader of a possession cult, found in different parts of the world against the most diverse religious backgrounds. It starts with his own disease, which was diagnosed as spirit possession at Anajinna, the holy site of the Husayniyya in Bale. He then developed ways of living with the spirits and finally the ability to communicate with them at will. Thus, he also qualified as a healer of others whose diseases were attributed to possession. He became famous, both as a healer and a diviner, and people

visited him from as far away as Mombasa. In his final years he rarely participated in any healing sessions himself; he had his “corporals” for that.

The ideas about possession and the practices of its treatment greatly resemble the *ayaana* cults elsewhere in the Oromo speaking world (e.g. on the Waso, 250 km to the south, Dahl 1989) and the *zar* cults common throughout North-Eastern Africa. As in *zar* possession, the afflicted persons are mostly women, but in the healing sessions there is no preponderance of women, as in *zar*. Among the Sakuye of Dabel, dealing with spirits is a mixed gender affair. Some spirits demand blood through the mouths of the possessed. So animals need to be bled and the patient drinks considerable amounts of blood (before their conversion to Islam, blood was a regular element of the Sakuye diet). This is not regarded as a breach of Islamic food avoidance rules, since the spirit, not the patient, is considered to be consuming the blood. And the spirit may well be a pagan and thus perfectly entitled to his share of blood. The idea that the spirit, and not the patient, consumes the food it demands was illustrated to me by the story of a woman whose spirit had just demanded a huge kettle full of coffee, which she had emptied. Then the spirit had enough and left her. The woman became herself again. And she was thirsty.

The Sakuye also find other excuses for drinking blood. The slightest health problem is enough to label blood as ‘medicine’ rather than ‘food’ and thus render it *halal* (lawful) in the eyes of the Sakuye.

Other spirits demand *hadar* dances, as they are also held on Islamic holidays. These are ecstatic drum sessions into which men and women join after dark in large groups, dancing shoulder to shoulder, with numerous participants, mostly women, falling into trance. It is not the type of thing regarded by the bookish type of sheikh in larger towns as orthodox.

This does not mean that there is little knowledge about Islam at Dabel. One of the sons of Abba Ganna is well versed in classical Arabic in which he is also able to converse.⁵ Other members of the community have travelled far and received formal Islamic education. When I once donated a set of Bukhari’s and Muslim’s *Ahaadith*, an authoritative collection of tales about the Prophet, to the community, a quarrel broke out between those able to read it. There was even talk of splitting the set and appropriating single volumes individually. What I mean to illustrate here is not the lack of knowledge about Islam, but the fact that Islamic scholarship and syncretic folk beliefs and practices exist side by side among the Sakuye. In the same family, one can find a long-haired mystic with a preference for ecstatic practices and a quiet scholar.

⁵ Often non-Arab African Muslims master Arabic only in what Owens (1995) using a computer analogy calls ‘the graphic mode’, i.e. they reproduce texts without analysing them, and of course, they cannot re-arrange the words to express ideas of their own.

We can summarise that in this setting of relatively new converts to Islam a variety of beliefs and practices exist side by side. Competition over leadership is low. People are free to express different ideas and to gather informal followings. From this case of non-intensified practice associated with low competition for leadership, we now move on to the rigidification of practices in more competitive settings. In the next section we shall turn to intensified and politicised forms of Sufism.

3.1.2. Sufism and Jihaad in Sudanic Africa

Jihaad movements led by Sufi sheikhs who rose through Sufi networks have occurred throughout the Sudanic belt of Africa from Senegal to Nilotic Sudan and beyond to Somalia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They include the *jihaad* of Sheikh ‘Uthmaan dan Fodio (Shehu Osman dan Fodio, ibn Fuudi and other spellings) which led to the foundation of the Caliphate of Sokoto with its dependency in Adamawa. This movement later merged with the Sudanese Mahdiyya because of the expectation of the Mahdi on the Nile and later, after the occupation of the Caliphate by the infidels, the *hijra* from Nigeria to the Sudan in the first decade of the 20th century. Other such *jihaad* movements include that of the Tijaani Sheikh Al Hajj ‘Umar Tall between the rivers Senegal and Niger. Descendants of Al Hajj ‘Umar and his followers are today also found in compact settlements in the Sudan and they have preserved their affiliation to the Tijaaniyya *tariqa* and their *jihaadist* memories. Such movements, which extended their spiritual and military might well into the 20th century, include the Sanusiyya in what would become Lybia and Chad and the “dervishes” of Muhammad ‘Abdille Hassan (Salihiyya) in future Somalia and Ogadeen.

In the contemporary political situation these movements, often with a political party attached, continue to exert influence. In Nigeria the “northern” emirs still have much political weight. In the Sudan the family of the Mahdi and the rival Khatmiyya are still affluent and powerful religious aristocracies, although now in opposition and partly in exile. The Islamist movement now in power there, the National Islamic Front, is not derived from a Sufi order. It would, however, be interesting to see how far it resembles a Sufi order structurally in its cell structure and the highly personalised leader-follower relationships.

The Wahabiyya of Saudi Arabia is not a Sufi order. It is quite opposed to Sufi practices and to any religious practices that cannot be directly derived from the Koran and be traced back to the time of the Prophet. It is, however, sociologically equivalent to all the Sufi-based movements that we have just enumerated: it is a politicised form of Islam, it has a ruling family and it was the nucleus of a state. Through Saudi petrodollars Wahabi influence can be felt and seen in the shape of new mosques in much of the Islamic world today.

I am now going to examine some shared features of these movements. These shall be traced in terms of their cultural history, but they also lend themselves to sociological comparison. There are models for establishing holiness and leadership on a competitive basis and ways to make the followers feel to be among the elected and to exclude Muslims who do not toe the line of the holy man from the inner circle or even to deny them their status as Muslims.

What strikes the reader who familiarises himself or herself with *jihaadist* movements from Senegambia to Indonesia most, are the frequent similarities of these movements. These are due to two factors: a common model and mutual contacts. The common pattern on which these movements model themselves is the life of the Prophet. The mutual contacts have mainly been established through the *hajj* which has united pilgrims from Morocco to the Malay Archipelago on a yearly basis for centuries: an instance of globalisation which predates anything that fashionable sociological theorists of “globalisation”, with their exclusive Euro-American focus, appear to be aware of. Wandering saints have also spent months and years, often on the way to or back from Mecca, visiting each other and worldly rulers, in the event that the two, warrior-king and saint, were not rolled into one. They are linked to each other by the spiritual descent lines between master and disciple and sometimes also by actual kinship by marrying from each other’s families.

There are, thus, two modes of transmission of shared elements (from a common source and from each other), which can, of course, occur simultaneously in a variety of mixtures. But one can also distinguish two *kinds* of shared features: the direct borrowings and the analogies.

First an example of direct borrowings: When the Prophet had fled from Mecca to Medina, he had two types of followers: the “refugees”, *muhaajiruun*, who had fled with him to Mecca or joined him at Medina from Mecca, and the Medinese helpers, the *ansaar*. Many leaders of later *jihaads* had, at some point in their struggles, to withdraw from one place to some other, and this was invariably called a *hijra*. Whoever joined the leader on the flight became a *muhaajir* and whoever joined him in the new place a *naasir* (sing. of *ansaar*). This is a direct transfer of names and institutions without much change of meaning.⁶

Borrowing by analogy requires additional steps. Words need to be changed as concepts are taken out of their original context and transferred into others. What constitutes the resulting analogy is the similarity of the figures of thought in the original and the new context and the identity of a part of the words used, which is sufficient to evoke the original phrase. An example is the description of Ahmad at-Tijaani, the founder of the Tijaaniyya, as *khatm al wilaaya* – ‘the seal of sainthood’. This phrase is, of course, coined after the designation of

⁶ On the *hijra* of al Hajj ‘Umar from Fouta Jalon to Dinguiray in Guinea, see Abun-Nasr 1965: 112, on the *ansaar* of the Sudanese Mahdi, see Holt 1961: 88.

Muhammad as *khatm al anbiya* – ‘the seal of the prophets’, meaning the last prophet. A strict reading of ‘the seal of sainthood’ by this analogy would imply that there would be no saints after Ahmad at-Tijaani. Since later personalities, like as-Sanusi, could not be denied sainthood, this position was gradually modified. Followers of the Tijaaniyya, however, would still regard Ahmad at-Tijaani as the perfect model and complete embodiment of *wilaaya*. Later saints will derive their inspiration from him. “There may be other *walis* after him, but none would surpass or supersede him.” (Abun-Nasr 1965: 30-32)

Metaphors of sealing and closing point to the exclusivist element of politicised Sufism. Only one way is the true way or at least the best way, so much so that no other way is worth taking. This is also reflected in numerical calculations about the efficiency of Sufi ritual formulae. About one such formula, the *salaat al faatih* of the Tijaaniyya, it is claimed that the Prophet who appeared to Ahmad at-Tijaani had informed him

“of its great efficacy in the remission of sins [...]. The Shaikh of the Tijaaniyya also claimed that the Prophet informed him that the merit of reciting it once was ‘equivalent to that of the recitation of all prayers of glorification to God (*tasbih*) that have ever been said in the universe, all Sufi prayers of remembrance of God (*dhikr*), every invocation (*du‘a*) long or short, and the [recitation of the] Qur’an six thousand times’.” (Abun-Nasr 1965: 51)

While the numbers involved are reminiscent of astronomy, the type of reasoning resembles Business Administration and accountancy. If one is conscious of costs and benefits, why should one recite long texts with little efficacy of salvation instead of short texts with a many times higher salvation impact? All other forms of Muslim piety appear as rather futile in comparison with the irresistible magic of the Tijaani formula, if one accepts these numerical proportions.

As the sheikh was in possession of the right formula for everything, followers had to show absolute obedience and loyalty. It was believed that God through His grace would admit to paradise anybody who followed the saint and would lead astray anybody who ceased to love the saint, so that such a person would die as an infidel and thus go to hell. Deviation from the path prescribed by the sheikh was thus regarded as deviation from the path to heaven. This comes close to the tendency among leading representatives of politicised Islam, even today, of condemning people and making statements about, who is going to heaven and who is going to hell, instead of leaving this decision to God, as the Koran would suggest.

This monopolisation of the truth and the exclusion from salvation of everybody who did not subscribe to it as well as exclusion from worldly resources was, of course, directed against other Muslims. That non-Muslims would go to hell went without saying. These exclusion strategies against other Muslims however, went beyond marking them as bad Muslims, they

contested their status as Muslims. One problem, which all saint-warriors of the 19th century in the Sudanic belt of Africa faced, was how to declare *jihad* against fellow Muslims, the normal condition for waging *jihad* being that it is directed against non-Muslims who have rejected a legal summons to convert.

The commonly held view is that anyone who has uttered the two articles of faith, the unity of God and the affirmation that Muhammad is His prophet, is a Muslim. By calling a Muslim a non-believer, one might even risk to place oneself outside the fold of Islam, because calling a Muslim a *kaafir* amounts to equating Islam with *kufir*, with Unbelief. How did the *jihad* leaders of the 19th century overcome this problem? ‘Uthmaan dan Fodio and his son Muhammad Bello set the precedent when they declared war against the sultan of Bornu, Muhammad al Kanemi. They reasoned that al Kanemi supported the Hausa sultans against them. These Hausa regarded themselves as Muslims as well, but the leaders of the Fulani *jihad*, ‘Uthmaan and his son, denounced them as unbelievers because they performed certain pagan rites and anyone who supports pagans against a Muslim ruler is to be regarded a pagan himself.

This model was later followed by al Hajj ‘Umar Tall when he declared war against Ahmadu Shaikhu, the king of Massina, the Defender of the Faith, the third in a line of Muslim rulers who had fought the pagans. Some of the converts made by them were found by al Hajj ‘Umar still to worship idols. As these people had fought against him, he constructed the same case of a Muslim supporting pagans against a Muslim ruler against Ahmadu as dan Fodio and Bello had constructed against al-Kanemi (Abun-Nasr 1965: 122-124).

Narrow definitions of who is a Muslim were also promoted in 19th century Africa by the practice of slavery. As Muslims are not allowed to enslave other Muslims, large numbers of converts threaten the potential slave supply. The further progress Islam has made and the more people have converted to it, the stronger the tendency becomes to separate ‘real’ Muslims by some set of criteria from nominal Muslims and to declare the latter as unbelievers in order to be able to enslave them (Meillassoux 1986). All these examples from 19th century Africa have shown how competition between different Islamic movements and their leaders, as well as the economic consequences of the spread of Islam, can be linked to the rigidification of ritual practices and distinctions between purer forms of Islam and less-pure forms, which often came to be labelled as non-Islamic.

3.2. *Glimpses of Egypt and the Sudan in the 1990s*

Now we turn to quite recent developments in two Muslim countries which are going to show that the links between status competition, political power and claims to ritual purity are as

robust now as they were one or two hundred years ago. In recent decades, the dominant forms of Islam, which demand strict adherence, no longer have anything to do with Sufism. In the Sudan the two parties, that have dominated politics since independence in 1956 or prevented politics from taking place by blocking each other, have been out of power since 1989. Both had their historical origins in Sufi orders and their charismatic leaders. Both are now referred to as the ‘traditional parties’ and their leaders as representatives of a ‘religious aristocracy’, which has been overthrown. The new leaders have discarded ‘tradition’. Their brand of Islam – and now I am speaking about the ideological level and not that of practice, which sometimes falls short of lofty ideals – can be seen as both minimalist and maximalist. They are minimalist in so far as they want to purify Islam of all historical accretions and go back to a scripturalist reading of the Koran and the *sunna*, the practices of the Prophet according to authenticated *ahaadith* (singular: *hadiith*, ‘tale, account’) as the only sources of the *shari’a* (apart from their own political agenda as an unnamed third source of inspiration). The “maximalist” element is that there is no limit to the demand of a formalistic form of piety, which penetrates all domains of life, and the *shari’a* is transformed to an all pervading force of regulation, which is a new development, since even in the classical periods of Islam, *qanuun*, the law of the ruler, and *aadat*, customary law, which was acknowledged as long as it was not in direct contradiction with the *shari’a*, had substantial roles to fill as well (Rahman 1982: 30).

While in Egypt the Islamist discourse is critical of the government, which is perceived as westernised and morally depraved, in the Sudan the government itself follows the Islamist line of reasoning, as do some of its critics who see to what degree power has corrupted the Islamist cause and now criticise the Islamist government on Islamist grounds. Since the take-over of power by the present National Islamic Front (NIF) regime in 1989, it has succeeded in monopolising both political power and business. Opponents have been weakened by destroying their businesses.⁷

Enough of high-level politics. In everyday life and in the interaction between the generations within families, we can observe status competition and the struggle for spaces of action as well. Just like in the political sphere, also these domestic or micro-social forms of competition are pervaded by ideas of purity and devotion.

While in many Islamic societies, the Mawliid, the birthday of the prophet, is an important festival, these modern Islamists (and the Wahaabi in Saudi Arabia before them) reject it. This makes perfect sense in the light of the *sunna*: the Prophet did not celebrate his birthday

⁷ Similar exclusionist discourses in a yet much more violent setting, Algeria, have recently been studied by Birgit Mara Kaiser (2002).

himself, and therefore this practice cannot be commended. In a recent study about female lifestyles in Cairo, in which she describes the various stages through which young students pass when becoming 'devout', Karin Werner (1997) mentions a discussion about birthdays. A young woman with the intention of gathering strength for becoming more 'devout' wanted to celebrate her birthday, and a friend who had adopted a more complete form of veiling and reached a higher stage of 'devoutness' tried to dissuade her from this and to "convince her to abandon this pagan habit". Werner goes on to explain: "In the Islamist camp there is a discussion going on about legitimate and illegitimate feasts. There exists a strong faction whose members vote only to celebrate the original Islamic feasts" (Werner 1997: 132, FN 128). Of course an Egyptian student would celebrate her birthday according to the universal Christian calendar while the Mawliid of the Prophet and all other Islamic festivals follow the Muslim calendar. This marks one kind of event clearly from the other, so that no one would be able to assume that the birthday of an ordinary person could be ascribed any religious significance, which could be construed as heterodox religious practice. But the logic behind this is different: any festivity, no matter how innocent, has to be forbidden, unless it is explicitly recommended by Islam. The *shari'a* is not just used to cleanse human lives of everything forbidden, but to restrict human lives to those things explicitly recommended by it. Celebrating birthdays or not is just one indicator of different sets of ideas about the functions of the Law.

Within groups of students and between them, hierarchies are established with reference to standards of moral purity. The 'normal' female students, i.e. those who have not adopted any of the more rigid forms of veiling, seem to have the more difficult game to play. They have to balance the requirements of appearing attractive to young men in mixed-gender groups with those of a sexual morality which, even among these 'Westernised' students, appears fairly restrictive if compared with contemporary Europe. Among the women-only Islamist student groups, the direction is clear: one adopts more and more restrictive forms of practice stage by stage, as one feels fit for them. There is no balance to be struck. Qualification for a high status in the mixed-gender groups would appear to require meeting a combination of the requirements of God and those of the devil to the latter type of group (Werner 1997: 138).

Islamist purity discourses are also used in the competition for authority between generations. The authority of the parental generation, which grew up in a much more secular and liberal cultural atmosphere, is challenged by the students. While lip service is paid to parental authority in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet, wherever the demands of the parents diverge from that of the religiously oriented peer-group, they are perceived as conflicting with the will of God. As God's orders overrule those of the parents, this line of

reasoning opens new spaces of self-determination for the members of the younger generation by pushing back the boundaries of the domain of parental authority (Werner 1997: 221).

Such discourses have another field of application in cross-gender strategies. Young unmarried women use Islamic norms to make their boyfriends ‘respect boundaries’. In one case the sudden adoption of a complete form of veiling led to a temporary breach in the relationship with a boyfriend who had been too persistent in his demands for sexual favours (Werner 1997: 135-138). Chastity, to the point of denying superficial forms of tenderness and jocular verbal exchanges, and the religious reasoning behind these forms of restrictive behaviour are used to increase the value of young women, both as respectable persons, and on the marriage market. There are no statistics to show whether this strategy is successful in procuring the type of husband desired. We have seen that the female students frequenting the mixed-gender peer groups pursue a different strategy: maintaining erotic tension without giving in to sexual demands. The strategy of the young women who adopt the fuller forms of veiling, however, poses a clear alternative: withholding and hiding female charm either helps in domesticating men and transforming them into responsible husbands or helps in frustrating them to such a degree that one gets rid of them.

The stages of ‘devoutness’ through which these young women pass are ordered by them along a numerical scale from 0% Muslim to 100% Muslim. We here, against a rather different theological background, find the same accountant-like attitude as above, among the Tijaani of the nineteenth century who calculate the efficiency of their prayer formulae. Here is an example by which criteria the young female students locate each other on such a scale: “While Jihan respected Shuruq’s knowledge of Islam, she took the fact that Shuruq didn’t wear a *hijab* as a shortcoming, and in a discussion on this topic Jihan evaluated Shuruq’s degree of religiosity as only 65 per cent (which was still more than the 55 per cent rating which she gave herself)” (Werner 1997: 130).⁸

These studies analyse Islamist discourses and their strategic use on the micro level, in couples, between parents and children and among groups of students on a campus. Werner even analyses the power play within a group of siblings (1997: 117 ff). This focus on everyday interaction among ordinary people is a necessary complement to our findings about purity and power at the level of politics and the state in the preceding section about the *jihadist* movements in 19th century Africa, and also to what has been said about present day politics in the Islamic world, which also abounds with power-sensitive purification discourses.

⁸ A study from another North-East African capital, Khartoum, provides additional illustrations of these female strategies (Nageeb 2000).

4. Conclusion

In the growth zone of the Islamic world, along its periphery, one might observe two phases in the history of interaction between Islam and non-Islamic cultures. They might not always be easy to separate and they might co-exist synchronically in neighbouring areas, but they might still make some sense, at least as types of interaction of which one tends to precede the other in time.

In the first phase of expansion Islam tends to tolerate and even accommodate many pre-Islamic elements. Islam is still weak and needs to pay for being accepted.⁹ It comes half the way to bridge the cultural gap between the Muslim minority and the host society.

Later, when at least nominal affiliation to Islam has become the rule, more purist and more exclusivist attitudes tend to be adopted. Politically, i.e. in terms of legitimation of claims to power, this makes perfect sense. If everybody is a Muslim, such claims cannot merely be based on being a Muslim. One needs to distinguish different degrees of virtue and claim the higher echelons for oneself.

Sufism illustrates the entire spectrum from a form of Islam, which is responsive to ideas and practices from outside to the most rigid and exclusive tendencies. Theologically it may be a special form of Islam – mystical Islam, as it is sometimes called – but sociologically it is not. We may find the same tendencies of inclusion and exclusion in Sufism as in other streams of Islam. Politics at all levels, from the small face-to-face group to the state and the international arena, seems to be a major determinant of where on a scale of piety Muslims locate themselves or are located. In a wider context we can say that standards of purity or excellence in ritual matters or the moral field are closely linked to exclusionist strategies in power games not only in Islam, but among adherents to all sorts of belief systems.

The examples we have discussed not only stem from Muslim settings. They are not exhaustive nor systematically chosen. I took my own fieldwork experience in Northeast Africa since 1974 as a starting point and then went on to include literature about neighbouring areas and cases further afield in Africa I read about. There is room for more systematic testing of the explanations given here. All these examples, however, suggest that standards of ritual purity or morality are density related. The more people compete for a resource, a status or an office, the more rigid the standards to be met appear to become. Standards of ritual purity should not be confused with moral standards; they may be integrated into systems of moral reasoning or not. Obedience to a rule may simply be explained by the reference to God or custom as the source of the rule or by pointing to what is considered proof of its efficiency:

⁹ I owe this phrase to Jamil Abun-Nasr, oral communication, early 1980s.

one has so far not suffered misfortune while following the rule. The correlation between the ritual requirement met and the status or power achieved exists irrespective of the complexity or simplicity or complete absence of doctrines attached to the ritual requirements. Classical sociology (Weber, Durkheim) ascribes a great deal of social and economic power to elaborate beliefs and moral convictions. In the light of the present findings, one might suspect that much of this is based on an over-sophisticated model of human beings. If meeting ritual requirements and sticking to rules has the same effects with and without elaborate beliefs associated with these practices, one can disregard the beliefs to some extent or at least look at their impact on practical life with a higher degree of scepticism.

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