



### Good Will Eritrean Ambassadors Are Prevailing

The Rule of Law  
(Commentary)  
By Teclu  
Testazghi  
Expressing  
Eritrean Views:  
By Teclu  
Halle

Amazingly, Eritrea has in excess of one hundred thousand good will envoys and ambassadors without portfolio deployed around the globe. These representatives, stand out from world crowd where they study, work and live. Indeed, Eritrea is blessed with such resolute children to look after her and care for its masses.

Eritrean envoys are world citizens of Eritrean origin. They include school children; homemakers tax drivers, service providers, entrepreneurs, and employees of wide range of industries and offices. They are member of the millions of Eritreans at home and abroad. *They are self-empowered Eritrean diplomats.* Every one of them is Eritrea's cultural attache representing the 3.5 million people in Eritrea. As Eritrean emissaries, they stand for Eritrea's nine different ethnic groups, each speaking its own distinct dialect, and rich cultural traditions.

Eritrean envoys, spontaneously, expressed their views on issue of the day. Many times, the envoys are the authors as well as audience, attempting to see both sides of contentious topics, including but not limited to:

- ❖ Eradicating illiteracy, while at the same time, nurturing and promoting skilled human resources to establish sustainable economic growth.
- ❖ Creating a common ground to debating democracy and transparency, within the context of Eritrean cultures, and proactive law abiding traditional societies
- ❖ Instituting effective constitution that grants individual liberty and pursue of happiness, while maintaining law and order consistent with responsible Eritrean characteristics.

Like any envoys of the world, Eritrean, volunteer-diplomats have their own down side. Examples of the shortcomings of Eritrean envoy-writers are the following:

*loyalistic circle*

*Debertera (Tigrigna for iniquitous cleric).* A style of writing that starts with a dutiful expression of facts or events, while at the same time, provides readers with malicious intentions. *Screen debteras* sound satanic in nature, and such style comes from nameless *screen debteras*, who do not identify themselves. Certain *screen debtera* appear to accept and practiced primitive methods, Big name Debrtas are willing to cause trouble by using of variety of magical tricks, hidden in semantics, between lines of most commentaries. To many observers, including myself, classic examples of Eritrea's prominent envoys are Dr. Araya Debessay, *Dr. Rereket et al*

Hasad, (Tigre for malicious), a power known as buda (Tigrigna for spiteful) is style of some screenwriters. Hasad writer like to attack adversary. Some of such screen budas sound as if they have grudges, few sound with a sort of capricious feelings. Few Hasads may be jam-packed with jealousies. It is uncommon to believed that a buda authors attempt to spell a scary tactics, as evidenced by specific efforts to induce an ability to express one's view on the subject matter. A demon or mischievous screen buda attacks a descent and well-behaved people, regardless of gender age of socio-economic status. As kerbe (Tigre) or zur (Hidareb) for obsession, screen buda are wrapping themselves by an Internet-address-netsetla to cover up their malicious state of mind. Typical examples of Hasad are, insiders such as Eritrea's former Ambassador to the Scandinavian countries. (read IT IS TIME FOR A DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE TO THE CURRENT PFDJ LEADERSHIP )

Hate-driven commentators Contrary to the belief of the Kunama and the Nara ethnic groups, that the world was created pure and simple, stainless and that the evil was manifested as the result of humankind-mistaken activities. Evil spirit roam in search dwelling places such as the human body thereby influencing the human body to do evil deeds until death departs them apart both. For Eritreans such myself, mean spirited envoys is *the mission, and practices of the awate team*, exceptionally militant, Eritrean envoys in their turfs, and disillusioned individuals such as Rahwasayle and Mehret as evidenced by this piece **TIME TO SPEAK UPI**

**In additions to colonial experience, it is a well knows fact that the Eritrean people have been exposed to all sorts of superstitions for ages. Some believe that superstitions cause financial and psychological harm and that for generations. Similarly, Hafash is getting mixes messages from its educated envoys in connection with present situations in Eritrea. Amazingly, Hafash-Envoys are becoming mindful of their duties and obligations to identify the evil and to teach themselves thereby abandoning superstitions, and destructive views expressed by selfish and short sighted envoys.**

Fortunately, the majority of Eritrean envoys are loyal their guiding principles, the foundations of Eritrean Struggle for Independence. They are determined to defend and protect Eritrea's sovereignty. These envoys are well intentioned screen authors with great respect for diversified-fellow Eritreans. Such commentators are genuine as evidenced by their resolute to defend and protect their mother land although they are challenged by above-described-groups with unacceptable and counter productive, and some times destructive views

Teclu

Teclu Tesfazghi is solely responsible for the contents of this page, contributes the above commentary. For any comments, the writer can be contacted by e-mail: Teclu@msnucleus.org



**ART IN THE CONTEXT OF ERITREAN SOCIETY**

*Comment & Articles by author this month*

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The word "art" embodying different meanings in our vernacular and literal language. To take an example, in biblical definition that the word "**Tbeb**" signifying "knowledge" as the saying goes: "mejemerya Tbeb frhat 'gzaber 'yu." Please refer to the beginning chapter of the Book of Proverbs dedicated to be named after King Solomon, the wisest sage of all time. However, in every day language "Tbeb" means skill or creativity, and hence "sne Tbeb" means the beauty of art. According to etymology, the word "sne" is derived from the root word "**seneye**" which means good. That is why we say in Tigrigna "**senay meAlti**", "**seni** tu" in Tigre, and " ziena senay (good news)" in Geez. The surrounding areas of Keren is called **senhit** which means beautiful. Is this because of its hospitable climate?

Sorry, I have never been at Keren.

Inspect the beauty of its semantic definition, those people who engage in performing arts are looked upon negatively in our society from time immemorial. The goldsmith is labeled as "**buda**", the fortune tellers or wise "**Tebib**", and the writer in ecclesiastical hierarchy "**debertera**", the singer "**azmari** or **wegae wata**", and the poet or orator "**Hamien**". In fact, debtera is the keeper of books (debter) or librarian in communal church. Anyway, these creative artists are always feared, and downgraded as long as they satisfy societal needs freely or with a minimum pay. That is why the art is not highly developed in our society.

Most of our amateurs and gifted artists such as the legendary Shiva sid, Atewebrhan Segid, Teweide Reda, Yemane Barya, Tekle Tesfazghi, Osman Abdelrahman and a host of others were entertaining our poor but grateful folk at local beer houses, religious or school festivals, wedding ceremonies that were and still are popular in the most heavily populated areas of Asmara such as 'aba shawl, geza birhanu, Hadish Adi, Edaga Arbi and not to mention shuq. They were like the scenes of Harlem Renaissance in Eritrea during the early period of national awakening. Some of my school friends including Birhane Adonay, Asmerom and Hailleab Istifanos first practiced their art works at home before showing them at YMCA, and at the then Hailleasselassie High in Asmara. One Eritrean whose name I forgot, but who used to go to the school located at Mendefera and Birhane Adonay won the first and second prizes respectively in art contest held in memory of Apollo 11. The nation wide competition was related to



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lunar land mission, and was sponsored by the United States Information Service based in Washington, DC.

What a shame!

Not one Eritrean businessman or some acknowledged men of letters like the Medici of Renaissance Italy or the Smithsonians of the Old Guard of the Americas encouraged the blooming Eritrean artists. However, some of them who lived to see the Eritrean independence in vivos among whom Birhane Adonay established an art school in the field during the struggle era. Like others, this fellow who is humble and who hates to show off deserves in special recognition along with his own associates in keeping alive the spirit of our folk arts to this date.

Next I will write a brief note on the art of penmanship or penmanship for that matter before appearing the full articles in detail.

I hope such reflections will generate more discussions in an effort to overcome the attitudinal barriers which are destructive in advancing the craft of arts in our society in the making.

Haile Bokure

Haile Bokure, contributed and has sole responsibility for the content on this page. Comments about this article you can contact the writer by e-mail: [Haile.Bokure](mailto:Haile.Bokure)



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### Faith and Tenets of the Eastern Orthodox Church

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The faith and practice of most Orthodox Christians combine elements from Monophysite Christianity as it has developed in Ethiopia over the centuries and from a non-Christian heritage rejected by more educated church members but usually shared by the ordinary priest. According to Monophysite doctrine, Christ is a divine aspect of the trinitarian God. Broadly, the Christian elements are God (in Amharic, Egztabher), the angels, and the saints. A hierarchy of angelic messengers and saints conveys the prayers of the faithful to God and carries out the divine will.

When an Ethiopian Christian is in difficulty, he or she appeals to these angels and saints as well as to God. In more formal and regular rituals, priests communicate on behalf of the community, and only priests may enter the inner sanctum of the usually circular or octagonal church where the ark (tabot) dedicated to the church's patron saint is housed. On important religious holidays, the ark is carried on the head of a priest and escorted in procession outside the church. The ark, not the church, is consecrated. Only those who feel pure, have fasted regularly, and have generally conducted themselves properly may enter the middle ring to take communion. At many services, most parish members remain in the outer ring, where debteras sing hymns and dance.

Weekly services constitute only a small part of an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian's religious observance. Several holy days require prolonged services, singing and dancing, and feasting. An important religious requirement, however, is the keeping of fast days. Only the clergy and the very devout maintain the full schedule of fasts, comprising 250 days, but the majority is expected to fast 165 days per year, including every Wednesday and Friday and the two months that include Lent and the Easter season.

In addition to standard holy days, most Christians observe many saint's days. A man might give a small feast on his personal saint's day. The local voluntary association (called the maheber) connected with each church honors its patron saint with a special service and a feast two or three times a year.

Belief in the existence of active spirits - many malevolent, some benevolent - is widespread among Ethiopians, whether Christian, Muslim, or pagan. The spirits called zar can be male or female and have a variety of personality traits. Many peasants believe they can prevent misfortune by propitiating the zar.

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The protective adbar spirits belong to the community rather than to the individual or family. The female adbar is thought to protect the community from disease, misfortune, and poverty, while the male adbar is said to prevent fighting, feuds, and war and to bring good harvests. People normally pay tribute to the adbars in the form of honey, grains, and butter.

Myths connected with the evil eye (buda) vary, but most people believe that the power rests with members of lowly occupational groups who interact with Amhara communities but are not part of them. To prevent the effects of the evil eye, people wear amulets or invoke God's name. Because one can never be sure of the source of illness or misfortune, the peasant has recourse to wizards who can make diagnoses and specify cures. Debetras also make amulets and charms designed to ward off satanic creatures.

The belief system, Christian and other, of peasant and priest was consonant with the prerevolutionary social order in its stress on hierarchy and order. The long-range effects on this belief system of a Marxist-Leninist regime that ostensibly intended to destroy the old social order were difficult to evaluate in mid-1991. Even though the regime introduced some change in the organization of the church and clergy, it was not likely that the regime had succeeded in significantly modifying the beliefs of ordinary Christians

Data as of 1991

### 2002 Report on Religious Liberty in Ethiopia

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## Ethiopian and Eritrean Refugees

### Background on Country of Origin

Ethiopia is an arid country located on the Horn of (East) Africa at the Red Sea. Ethiopia was never colonized, but in 1935 suffered terribly at the hands of Italy's army as a prelude to WWII. The country was ruled from 1930 until 1973 by the Emperor Haile Selassie. In 1973, the Emperor was overthrown by a group of army officers who established a repressive marxist military regime. Along with the repression came drought, famine, a secessionist movement in Eritrea, and other conflicts.

Ethiopia and Eritrea are now separate countries, but culturally are similar, and considered the same by some sources. Major cultural groups living in Ethiopia include the Amhara and in western Ethiopia, the Oromo. In Eritrea, Tigrans are the most common group. Other groups living in Ethiopia/Eritrea include the Afad-Isas, Somalis, Wolaitas, Sidamas, Kimbatas, and Hadiyas.

### History of Immigration

Prior to the 1973 coup, there were very few Ethiopians living in the West. Out-migration began immediately after the coup. A common experience was for a small group of 5-20 people to travel across the desert by night and hide by day. The journey to the country of first asylum was dangerous and many died on the way. Migration to the West began in 1980, with the greatest number of Ethiopians coming to the U.S. from 1983-1993. Estimates of the number of Ethiopians in North America range as high as 250,000 (Hodes, 1997). This probably is inflated. There were major airlifts of more than 55,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel in 1985 and 1991 (Operations Moses and Solomon). Most of these were illiterate farmers.

Ethiopians/Eritreans living in the West are most often from urban backgrounds and many came with or obtained college degrees in their host countries. Most live in large urban areas on the East and West coasts as well as in Houston and Dallas. As noted in the section on families, Ethiopians/Eritreans living in the West are disproportionately male and young.

### Culture

Influences operational to varying degrees in the lives of Ethiopians/Eritreans include traditional thinking (especially among the Oromo and those from rural backgrounds), the Coptic Church, and Islam.

Foods are spicy and tend to be "heavy" and served in large portions, especially late in the day. A thin spongy bread is served and is used in place of utensils. Ethiopians tend to be very conscious of the need for hand washing before meals (and perhaps at other times as well).

### Communications

Amharic is the national language of Ethiopia (the Amhara people) and Tigrinya the

language of Eritrea (the Tigrean people) - though both languages may be used in either country. A third language, Oromigna is used by the Oromo people living mostly in western Ethiopia. Most Ethiopians/Eritreans prefer translations and other assistance be provided by persons from their own ethnic or linguistic group - thus translation by an Amhara person for a Tigrean will not be as effective as a Tigrean translating for a Tigrean.

Communication tends to be direct, with most people usually speaking softly. Among those who live in the West, eye contact is usually direct. Little emotion or affect is shown to strangers, but physical affection is common between friends.

## Religion

Most Ethiopians/Eritreans are Coptic Christians (or Ethiopian Orthodox). Some are Muslim and some Jewish - with many of the later immigrating to Israel 1985 & 1991. As discussed in the section on Religions this branch of Christianity views the spiritual and physical worlds as similarly sacred and makes wide use of icons. Intercossory prayer is used to obtain God's healing in physical and mental illness.

Both Muslims and Coptic Christians practice restriction of some foods. Muslims are forbidden pork and other flesh not properly killed. Muslims also do not eat from vessels in which pork may have been served or cooked. Coptic Christians do not consume meat or dairy products for more than half of each year. The latter is probably more closely followed in the homeland than in the West.

## Social relations

The ideal family structure and living arrangement is the extended family. However, there are few truly extended Ethiopian/Eritrean families living in the West. Ethnomed notes that the divorce rate is high and that is particularly difficult for single female head-of-household parents to raise children.

In most families, men are dominant, although the roles of some Ethiopian/Eritrean women are changing rapidly in the West. At least in the early days of out-migration, there were many more men than women coming to the U.S. and other countries of refuge. The imbalance of men and women has changed somewhat (now 65% male and 35% female), but single Ethiopian/Eritrean males are more common than among other refugee groups. This is particularly a problem when single men become ill and do not have the social support of family and wife.

Ethiopian/Eritrean women are perceived as needing protection by their husband or male family members. Men make most of the decisions, especially those in relation to the outside world. The emancipation of Ethiopian/Eritrean women in the West is changing family and interpersonal dynamics - including this decision-making. Factors promoting women's emancipation include (1) the power of Western culture and the women's movement and (2) the lack of Ethiopian/Eritrean women living in the West, i.e., with an abundance of men, women do not have to tolerate being dominated.

Traditionally, disputes are settled by community (male) elders. Originally in the West there were few such men, but leaders and elders have emerged in the Ethiopian/Eritrean communities in host countries.

## Health Care Problems



Although the drought has eased and the famine far less dramatic than in the 1970s, malnutrition remains a widespread problem in rural and, to a lesser extent, urban Ethiopia/Eritrea.

Few Ethiopians/Eritreans arrive in the West with the dramatic health problems and malnutrition seen in the early days of displacement. Nevertheless, health problems are common, and may include the long-term effects of malnutrition, war trauma (physical and psychological), and a variety of infectious diseases. The prevalence of hepatitis B is high among Ethiopians/Eritreans and other sub-Saharan Africans. In one study, more than half of children >10 years have serological markers for past HBV infection (Bisharat, Elias, Raz, & Flatau, 1998).

Medical problems most commonly seen in newly arriving refugees from Ethiopia/Eritrea and other East African countries (Ackerman, 1997; Gavagan & Brodyaga, 1998) are listed below. Also see the [Infectious Diseases](#) site.

- Malnutrition
- Intestinal parasites (*Enterobius*, *Trichuris*, *Strongyloides*, and *Ascaris*)
- Filariasis
- Leishmaniasis
- Hepatitis B
- Tuberculosis
- Low immunization rate
- Dental caries
- Typhoid fever
- Malaria
- Trachoma
- Syphilis
- Dengue fever
- HIV infection
- Diarrheal illnesses
- Hansen's disease

Recommended laboratory and other tests include:

- Nutritional assessment
- Stool for ova and parasites
- Hepatitis B surface antigen
- Hemoglobin or hematocrit
- VDRL
- HIV
- PPD
- Peripheral smear for malaria should be considered

Other problems that practitioners should be especially alert to are cervical cancer, ectoparasites, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

### Health Care Beliefs and Practices

Traditional Ethiopian/Eritrean belief is that health results from equilibrium between the body and the outside world; and illness from disequilibrium. The external world may be either the physical (sun, temperature, foods, etc.) or the spiritual world. The

relationship between the person and the supernatural world is very important in maintaining health and happiness. Those who live in the Western world are more likely to understand biomedical principles of causation.

Traditional herbal medicine is highly developed and widely used in Ethiopia/Eritrea. Analyses of extracts/tractions taken from traditional herbal medicines show that many such substances have significant activity against disorders for which they are used, e.g., parasites, infections, and other medical problems. There are at least 21 specialized traditional healers operating in Ethiopia/Eritrea. These include tooth extractors, cuppers (i.e., suctioning or cupping - sometimes large amounts of blood), amulet writers, seers, herbalists, and uvula cutters.

As with many others from the Third World, Ethiopians/Eritreans put great stock in medications, with injections more valued than oral medications. Many patients are dissatisfied if medications are not given while diagnostic tests are pending or the illness does not necessarily call for medication.

Several resources note that Ethiopians/Eritreans tend to take less fluids than is healthy. Fluids are preferred at room temperature. Fluids are particularly a problem when a patient is in the hospital where hydration is most important and drinks are often offered with ice.

Ritual female genital cutting (FGC) is practiced by Ethiopians/Eritreans from all three major religions (Coptic, Muslim, Jewish). Cutting usually is done in infancy or childhood and is classified by the WHO as Type I, the removal of the prepuce and/or part or all of the clitoris; Type II, the removal of prepuce and clitoris together with the partial or complete excision of the labia minora; Type III (or infibulation), the removal of the clitoris, the adjacent labia (majora and minora), followed by the pulling of the scraped sides of the vulva across the vagina and securing with thorns or sewn with catgut or thread except for a small opening to allow passage of urine and menstrual fluid; or Type IV Unclassified. 90-95% of women from Eritrea and Ethiopia have had FGC performed, mostly Types I or II. In some cases, FGC may consist of slight ritual scarring. See the section on Refugee Women and Health Issues. Magico-religious practices are common in Ethiopia/Eritrea, and some continue among refugees in the west. Amulets (*kitab*) are worn by some, usually under clothing.

A person's mental condition is thought to play an important role in her or his physical health, hence shocking or potentially traumatic news should be given with care and with family or friend support at hand. Many will prefer that a poor prognosis or other such news be given first to a (male) family member. Open discussion of terminal illness is not desired by most; and acceptance of a poor prognosis is unusual.

Mental illness is attributed to evil spirits by both Muslims and Christians. Mental illness is sometimes attributed to possession by the *Zar* spirit, especially among newer refugees or immigrants. Zar possession is more common among women in Ethiopia/Eritrea and among men in refugees and immigrants living in the Western world. Harm can be inflicted on others by persons with *buda* or the power of evil eye. Spirit possession is treated with prayer and herbal preparations or holy water depending on whether the patient is Muslim or Christian. Some people may utilize different sources of religious and medical help for mental disorders, with the reputation of the healer of greater importance than his religious orientation.

Somatic complaints as a manifestation of emotional distress are common. These complaints are often vague and/or difficult to treat. Therapy in mental illness or distress should be more active and include the family. Hodes (1997) suggests low doses of antidepressants as especially helpful.

Hospitalized or sick patients take on a passive and dependent role. Physicians are expected to know and convey to the patient what is best for the patient. As with many others from third world countries (especially those with less education), large amounts of information and frequent decision-making by the patient or family may induce anxiety. Health care providers are expected to be warm and friendly (but not act as partners in the health relationship). In Ethiopia/Eritrea the extended family plays a significant role in the care of hospitalized patients, but in the West, few Ethiopian/Eritrean families are of sufficient size to take on such a role and the health care system does not accommodate extensive involvement in care. As among other refugees and immigrants, being in a sick role intensifies whatever difficulties an Ethiopian patient may have in adjustment to a different culture.

Most Ethiopians/Eritreans are stoic with respect to physical (and emotional) pain. Pain medications may be refused and pain control in advanced disease such as cancer is difficult to achieve.

### Specific Ethiopian/Eritrean Beliefs About Health and Illness (Hodes, 1997)

- Excess sun (especially if sun strikes a part of the body that is sweating or unclean) causes *mitch* which is translated as sunstroke, but causes rash, itching, or herpes.
- The heart is thought to regulate other organs by producing heat and not involved with blood. Complaints of a "heart problem" (vs. complaints of cardiac symptoms) may be related to dyspepsia or other GI problem.
- The vulva is believed to put infants at risk for suffocation, hence is excised in many Ethiopians/Eritreans.
- Eye problems may be treated with incisions of the eyelids or eyebrows.
- Amulets to treat or prevent disease are called *kitab*.
- Diarthra in infants may be treated by extracting the milk teeth.
- The evil eye is called *buda* and infants are especially vulnerable.
- Menopause that leads to increase in abdominal girth may be attributed to pregnancy which "stays bone."
- *Moygnbagen* or "get a fool" is a traditional disease with symptoms of syncope, fever, headache, abdominal cramps, or stiff neck. The disease is treated by bloodletting (brachial vein).
- Wind (cold) may cause pleuritic chest pain or *wugat*. Treatment is with cupping.
- The stomach is believed to be an inert organ in which ascaris worms live and process food.

- Sexually transmitted diseases may be attributed to urinating under a full moon, urinating on a hot stone, contact with an infected dog, or other means. HIV infection is increasing in Ethiopia.
- Having sex weakens tuberculosis medicines. Responses to this belief may include divorce, ceasing sex, or discontinuing the medications (R. Hodes, personal communication 1/2000).

### Pregnancy and Childbirth

Among rural people, pregnancy is thought to be a time of increased vulnerability for the mother. The fetus is also at risk for harm from evil spirits and sorcery. In Ethiopia/Eritrea, most deliveries are performed by a midwife or female family members. In the West, Ethiopians/Eritrean women prefer female physicians. Some feel that Western physicians are too quick to perform Cesarean sections and attempt to prevent such intervention by waiting as long as possible to go to the hospital for delivery.

Some women practice a brief symbolic rejection of the infant for the discomfort and pain caused by pregnancy and delivery. After delivery, the mother may stay in the home for two-six weeks. Breast-feeding (for up to three years) is the norm in Ethiopia and also is practiced in the U.S., but for a shorter time. Many mothers introduce other foods at about four months.

Family planning was not widely available in Ethiopia/Eritrea, but is well-accepted by many Ethiopians/Eritreans in the West.

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Author: Charles Kemp, RN, CRNH

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Chapter Two: Ethiopian Prayer

“eile buna nagay nuuklen

eele buna ijyolen haagudatu

hoormati haagudatu

waan haamtu nuura dow

bokai magr nuken”

Garri/Oromo Prayer:

The coffee bean has long been a symbol of power in Harrar. The caste of growers, the Harash, not only bore the city's name but were forbidden to go beyond its walls lest the art of cultivation be lost. The head of the Amir's bodyguard was allowed a small private coffee garden as a sign of his rank.

And of course, natives worshipped to their coffee pots, like in the prayer above, which translates .

“Coffee pot give us peace

let children grow

let our wealth swell

please protect us from evils

give us rain and grass”

I think we all pray to the first cup of the day. It's a silent prayer, sung while the mind is still foggy and blue. “O Magic Cup, (it might go) Carry me Above the Traffic Jam. Keep me Civil in the Subway. And Forgive My Employer, as You Forgive Me. Amen.” But the prayer above from the Garri/Oromo tribe is more serious, part of a ritual called Bun-galle that celebrates sex and death, and in which the coffee bean replaces the fatted ox in a sacrifice to the gods. Among the Garri the husking of the coffee fruit symbolizes slaughter, with the priests biting the heads off the sacrificial creatures. After this, the beans are cooked in butter and chewed by the elders. Their spiritual power thus enhanced, they pronounce a blessing on the proceedings and smear the holy coffee-scented butter on the participants' foreheads. The beans are then mixed with sweet milk and everybody drinks the liquid while reciting the prayer.

If the whole affair seems vaguely familiar, it should. Who has gone to a business meeting where coffee is not offered? It's use as an intellectual lubricant and its ability to “swell our wealth” per the Garri prayer, has made having a pot ready for consumption an international business norm. Looked at this way, a modern business office is nothing more than a “tribe” camped out about its own sacred pot and the bun-galle is nothing less than man's first coffee klatch, archetype of the world's most common social ritual.

There are two things that mark it as probably the earliest use of coffee as a mind-altering/magical drug. The first is that the beans are fried and then eaten, a practice clearly derived from the coffee balls chewed by Oromo warriors near Kefa. The Garri, who live a few hundred miles south of

Harar, are related to the Oromo and share their language. The second part of the ceremony, where the roasted beans are added to milk and imbibed, indicates it predates Islam (600 A.D.) because Islamic alchemists believed that mixing coffee and milk caused leprosy (a belief that lies at the root of the disdain many Europeans have for coffee with milk).

Further indication of the ceremony's extreme antiquity is the fact that the Garri associate bun-galle with the sky god Waag. Waag may sound uncouth to us, but this worship of the Sky-God is thought to be among the world's first religions with roots in Cushitic folk beliefs. Dating this stuff is folly yet it appears that Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaton in 1350 BC introduced worship of the sun god, Atum-Re, to replace the prior Amon-Ra. Whether the eating of coffee beans was performed in the original Waag ceremonies is beyond knowing. One can say, I think, that since the Garri were doubtless among the first to taste our favorite bean, and since primitive people who discover psychoactive drugs tend to worship them (a penchant today denigrated as mere substance abuse), it seems likely that consuming the beans was added to the Waag ceremonies at a relatively early date.

In the Oromo culture of Western Ethiopia, the coffee bean's resemblance to a woman's sexual organs has given birth to another bun-galle ceremony with such heavy sexual significance that it is preceded by a night of abstinence, according to the work of anthropologist Lambert Bartel. Oromo elder Gammachu Magarsa told Bartel that, "we compare this biting open of the coffee fruits with the first sexual intercourse on the wedding day, when the man has to force the girl to open her thighs in order to get access to her vagina."

After husking the beans, they are stirred in the butter with a stick called *damnaba*, the word for penis. Some people replace the stick with bundles of living grass because a dead piece of wood cannot "impart life" or impregnate the beans. As the beans are stirred, another prayer is recited until finally the coffee fruits burst open from the heat, crying "Tass!" The person stirring them recites

Ashama, my coffee, burst open to bring peace

There you opened your mouth;

please wish me peace

Keep far from me all evil tongues.

The bursting of the fruit is likened both to childbirth and the traditional last cry of the dying man. In being eaten the coffee bean "dies," giving blessings as it does and creating new thought and life, a tradition which the Oromo say goes back as far as anyone can remember.

After the bean has spoken, the assembly moves on to the matter at hand, such as a circumcision, marriage, land dispute, or the undertaking of a dangerous journey.

One important point about the bun-galle. The beans are simply added whole to the milk, not pulverized. True infusion, where crushed beans are added to a neutral liquid like water, thus completely releasing the bean's power, is reserved for the darker acts such as laying a curse or, as in tonight's ceremony, the exorcism of an evil spirit.

#

"Sounds like you've been ripped off," said Aaron.

Aaron was an American health care expert who I met while waiting for Abera to take me to the Zar ceremony. He was in Ethiopia killing a few weeks before returning to corporate America.

"Forty birra," he said, referring to what I'd given Abera for the "present." "Lot of money. I hope I'm wrong."

Aaron had a particularly low opinion of Ethiopians and, like any good bureaucrat, had found some studies to back up his point-of-view. According to these, the massive influx of international aid during the famines had made begging from foreigners the social norm. It was as natural as breathing, according to Aaron. True or not, there was no denying urban Ethiopia was filled with a type of begging I'd only previously encountered in America, i.e., people obviously in no real need striking up mock-friendships merely to cadge a few birra.

"No, you'll never see your friend again," Aaron assured me. "Why don't you come up to my room and check out these baskets I bought? They were only \$70 each."

Abera appeared, right on time. Everything was arranged. I could attend.

"But don't give them anymore presents!" he instructed again. "It is enough. And don't drink anything they give you at the ceremony."

The only disappointment was that he would not be going. He had a test to cram for. Instead his friend, a devout Catholic, had agreed to take me.

"Catholic? Will he show up?" I asked.

"He promised." Abera sounded uncertain. "Stewart, I have to ask you something. Will you be wearing your hat?"

Abera was referring to my old straw hat, the one that the first Kati-lady in Jiga-Jiga had found so amusing. You know how it is when you get so attached to a particular article of clothing that you just can't bear to throw it away? Well, I'd become very fond of this hat, a K-Mart special Australian style number, and over the last year of travel it had suffered considerable trauma. By the time I arrived in Ethiopia, it was little more than a crumpled piece of straw held together with half-a-dozen black patches. And dirty - I didn't dare wash it lest it dissolve. I loved it all the same. Every nation reacted in a different but characteristic way. Nepalese offered facetiously large sums of money for it. Indians laughed and praised its "unique quality." The Ethiopians merely thought it unhygienic.

"You cannot wear that hat," said Abera. "Not tonight. It would be disrespectful." He pulled out an Islamic style scarf. "Wear this. I will tie it on for you."

"OK." I knew he was right. Besides, the scarf was rather stylish: white with blue and red fleur-de-lis type patterns. Abera tied it on, turban style.

"It looks good," he said. "You look like a Muslim."

"So I'm in disguise?"

"Maybe. Not a bad idea when you walk in Harar late at night."

We chatted for awhile. He refused my offer of dinner and, after a final exhortation to send him copies of *Cosmopolitan Magazine* (he rewrote the articles for the university paper), he departed. I sat down to wait in the hotel lobby.

Eight o'clock came and went. Then nine. Ten too. The hotel guard was spreading out his sleeping roll when there came a knock on the front door. It was Abera's friend. I thanked him for coming but asked if he thought the ceremony might be over, since we were running two hours late. No problem, he said. Nonetheless, we hurried through Harrar's darkened alleys. Squatting men called out greetings. The woman, more diffident, smiled hello.

"They think you are Muslim," my friend commented, pointing to my headpiece.

At first there were lots of people about. But as we moved out of the central area it grew quiet. My companion fell silent. An ancient center of the slave trade, Harrar's streets are said to be haunted by spirits from all the tribes that have been enslaved here. Its hyenas, traditionally believed to be hermaphroditic, are said by some to be spirits of the poor boys castrated and sold as eunuchs. According to the 18th century French traveler Antoine d'Abladie, hyenas were thought to be a type of werewolf called buda that attacked and ate Zar spirits.

As we approached the house where the Zar ceremony was to be held, I heard singing. The exorcism was already in progress. My companion indicated silence and we slipped into a long, narrow room lit by a single lamp. A crowd of perhaps twenty people squatted near the door. Halfway down the room hung a dirty white sheet through which we could see the silhouette of the sheyka reclining on a huge brass bed. Before the sheet stood the first patient. Since we had arrived late, I was never quite clear as to the nature of this man's ailment. But the sheyka had already identified the possessing spirit and convinced it to leave the man in peace if he sacrificed three cocks with certain colored feathers about their necks.

A glass of pale liquor was passed around the room. People chatted in low voices. I was pleasantly surprised to be ignored. Apparently my "disguise" was working and I was being taken for some sort of foreign Muslim. Some of the people crouching by the wall began to rock slowly back and forth and sing a curious syncope melody over and over. Incense was thrown on a brazier.

The traditional way to begin these exorcisms may include sacrificing a pair of doves or the taking of ganga or alcohol. All include the roasting of green coffee beans which are then chewed and brewed, thus "opening the box" and releasing the power of the sheyka so he can communicate with the Zar spirits, described as being toeless and having holes in their hands which, if you look through them, reveal another world. They are also said to be beautiful and come in a range of racial archetypes like Arab, White, Chinese. The word Zar is thought by some to be a corruption of Jar which in the Cushitic language of the Agaw tribe is the name for Waaq the sky god. Ethiopian Zar priests traditionally come from a tribe called Wato or Wallo, the name of the lake where tonight's priest was trained and Ethiopia's most ancient holy spot. The Wallo tribe claims to be the original Oromo coffee-chewers and at one point were so feared for their magical powers that other tribes dared not molest them. Until recently it was customary to plant a coffee tree on the graves of particularly powerful sorcerers, and the Oromo say that the first coffee-tree grew from the tears of the Sky-God as they fell on the body of a dead wizard.

I've called this ceremony an exorcism, but it's really a negotiation between the Zar and sheyka, who alone can communicate with the Zar and, if necessary, bargain them down to more reasonable requests. The role of coffee in these ceremonies is perhaps comparable to the peyote "allies" popularized in Carlos Castaneda's *Way of Knowledge* trilogy inasmuch as the "spirits" within the bean can only function according to the abilities of the person who has released them



by taking them into his body.

A girl came forward and placed more gifts on the ground before the sheyka's silhouette. She suffered from headaches, it seemed, terrible, horrible headaches that would last for days. As she talked, the sheyka's silhouette could be seen shivering.

The girl stopped and stood mute while her narration of woes was picked up by a male relative. From his description, it appeared her difficulties were more serious than headaches.

"It is a problem in the head," whispered Abera's friend.

She'd been having fits and strange violent seizures in which she destroyed furniture. The family had decided to consult the Zar priest when she had tried to bite off her mother's finger. The audience moaned as her tale unfolded. Her symptoms indicated classic evil Zar possession. The Zar tend to inhabit women, whom they mount like a horse and force to perform unnatural acts, including self-mutilation with iron bars, the scars of which invariably disappear by morning.

Suddenly the girl threw herself to the ground and started yelling, clutching her head, and shivering as if in great pain. It grew more and more pronounced as the sheyka questioned the evil spirit within her. During all this, my Catholic friend shook his head in disgust. Finally it was decided the girl's family would donate a calf. Then the girl's Zar made a highly unusual demand - she must cut off all her hair and go alone to scatter the strands in the fields beyond the village where the hyenas waited.

A pair of scissors was fetched. But when they began to cut, the girl pointed to where we sat. Apparently my disguise was not as good as I'd thought. She did not want a foreigner to witness her shearing. We had to leave.

As we trudged back to the hotel Abera's friend explained things I had not understood. He had a low regard for the proceedings. I mentioned that in America we had similar healers on TV.

"They too use coffee beans?" he asked.

"Well, coffee is certainly popular among them," I explained. "But for payment they generally prefer credit cards."

I was told the next day that all traces of the girl's hair had vanished from the fields by sunrise.

#

Once the Ethiopians discovered coffee's psychedelic powers, it was only a question of time before their neighbors caught on. By some accounts it was the Pharonic Egyptians to the north who first got hooked, with some overexcited scholars speculating that their legendary nepenthe consumed by Helen of Troy to "ease her sorrows" was an early form of the Frappuccino.

But the main direction the coffee bean headed from Harrar was east to the Red Sea, then by boat to the port of al-Makkha, also known as Mocha, in what is today the nation of Yemen. There was a fair amount of trading going on between Harrar and al-Makkha back in the first millennium.

Mainly ostrich feathers, rhinoceros horn and tortoise shell. The essentials. And slaves, of course. The Arabs were notorious slave traders, and roamed this area in search of the victims the called Zanj, the meaning of which is unknown to me yet which I suspect is derisive. Despite this, the Zanj were fond of the Arabs, or at least of their sweets. "The Zanj held the (Arabs) in awe, prostrating themselves and calling out, 'Greetings, O People from the Land of Dates!'" according

to the medieval Arab writer Kitāb al-Aḡā'il al-Hind. "For those who travel to this country steal the children of the Zanj with sweet dates, luring them from place to place (with sight of the sweets) and then taking possession of them and carrying them off to their own countries."

A thousand years ago it took the slave caravans up to twenty days to travel from Harrar to the Red Sea coast. Boys destined for the Turkish harems were castrated on the roadside. The kidnapped Africans ate coffee-balls to keep their energy up, and the trails are said to still be shaded by coffee trees that sprouted from their leftovers.

My own journey to the Red Sea took only three days. I hitched from Harrar to the town of Dire Dawa near the country's sole railroad. The train was a day late in arriving, but a beauty when it showed; a baby blue, turn of the century French Chemin de Fer with old fashioned reclining seats (at least in first class), whose upholstery had disintegrated into filthy shreds. What was supposed to be a twelve hour journey took two days due to breakdowns. As I had just spent a year in India, these kinds of delays seemed perfectly natural; I merely closed my eye and pretended to be dead (or maybe I was just wishing).

We finally disembarked in the port of Djibouti, a town which the 13th century Islamic pilgrim Ibn Battuta described as, "the dirtiest, most disagreeable and most stinking town in the world," whose citizens had a taste for camel flesh. Today Djibouti is technically a nation. In reality, it's a glorified French military post bursting with bars and brothels. My first stop was a café for a cold drink.

"You speak English?" A big-bellied man in a plaid skirt, a kanga, had followed me in and seated himself at the next table. "Tu parles Français?"

"Yes."

He studied my hat. "Ah - an American man. Good! I speak twelve languages," he informed me. "I have sailed to every port in all the world - Cairo, Alexandria, Venice, New York, Athens, Sydney, Hong Kong. . . ."

The list continued. He was a retired sailor.

"And so I have returned to 'Jibouti. You like?" I raised my eyebrows in a grimace of pleasure. "Why have you come?" he asked.

I explained I was looking for a boat going to al-Makkha.

He looked at me in surprise. "Al-Makkha? Why do you go there?"

"Coffee."

"You go to Yemen for coffee?" he translated for the crowd at the bar. Everybody burst into laughter. "Not many boats are going there today, my friend."

He explained that just yesterday Eritrea had invaded a group of Yemeni islands located mid-way between the two countries. The Red Sea was crawling with armies from both sides and the Yemen air force had reportedly been bombing suspicious looking vessels.

"But you are lucky. My friend's boat leaves today. Some people they have waited two weeks and will not worry about the bombs. But you must hurry!"

His friend's boat turned out to be thirty-foot long vessel whose brightly painted hull had long ago faded to gray. There was a hut of sorts toward the rear, and a rudimentary mast (no sail) but not much else. There was no radio, no light and no emergency equipment of any kind. The toilet was a box with a hole in the bottom hanging over the ocean. There wasn't even a deck, just a jumble of crates covered with a green tarp, across which were scattered fifteen Somali refugees.

But it floated. Captain Abdon Hager and I quickly settled on thirty dollars. I hopped aboard and five minutes later the Qasid Karin shook the rats off its lines and set off. It was that hour in the evening when the sun sinks out of sight, sending thick, buttery golden rays across the sky. The sea turned dark purple. Tomorrow, I thought, I'll be in Yemen. As we reached the harbor mouth, the ship slowed. There was a splash and the engine went off.

"There is too much wind," explained a fourteen-year-old Somali boy next to me. "We go tomorrow."

His name was Mohammed. He and his sister were being sent by their parents to live with relatives in Yemen until the war ended. He was beautiful, I suppose, slender and tall with incredibly large feminine eyes and pouting lips. If he'd been dressed in a woman's clothes, I would have taken him for a young girl. He asked if America had warlords like the ones in Somalia. Oh yes, I said. All the big cities had warlords. He and his sister, Ali, seemed surprised. Did the American warlords have tanks and guns? they wanted to know. No tanks, I said, but lots of guns. I assured them that many neighborhoods in America were indistinguishable from Mogadishu.

After a few minutes of chatting, Mohammed, who spoke very limited English (though better than my Somali), gave me a present.

"I want you have this," he said, placing a wad of Somali money in my hands. "Take."

I objected. Somali refugees shouldn't give cash to American tourists. Quite the opposite. And I had absolutely no intention of handing out handfuls of American money in return.

"No, no, no," I said. "You shouldn't do that."

"Yes, yes." He thrust the money back into my hands. "Take."

"It's very pretty," I said. It came to about 15,000 Somali shillings. "I cannot take this. You're a crazy man."

An Ethiopian who spoke better English intervened. The Somali government no longer existed. The money was worthless. I accepted the pretty pieces of paper. Mohammed appeared mystified as to why I would only accept his gift if I thought it was worthless.

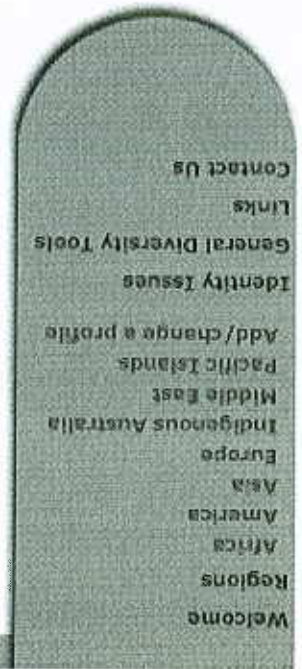
His sister, Ali, was also distraught, mainly because in Yemen she would be obliged to don the veil. She pulled the hem of her robe over her face mockingly.

"Bad, bad," she said. "Not in my country." Her face was a wonderful mix of Arab and African features. She piled me with tea and biscuits. I gave her my Arab-English dictionary. Around two in the morning they pulled out their prized possession, a Casio mini-keyboard. I played them the opening to Mozart's "Sonata in A" but they were more interested in the machine's auto-rhythm controls, that produced a steady syncopation in whatever style you selected. In the days when coffee made this journey these two would have been bound for slavery, I thought, listening to the insidiously bossa nova thumping against the wind. Now they were only refugees; I wondered if that

qualified as a real improvement.

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## Eritrea

Please note: the following information is intended to alert you to some of the ways that culture impacts on health care but may not apply to all Eritreans.

### Language / Communication

- Language:
  - Tigrinya is the national language
  - Other major languages - Amharic, Oromigna
  - There are nine ethnic groups, each with its own language.
  - Eye contact is valued
  - Little emotion or affect shown to strangers
  - Religious leaders and elders are given significant respect.

### Interpreters

- Eritrea was at war with Ethiopia for 30 years. Eritrean clients may prefer translations by their own linguistic / ethnic group (i.e. not from Ethiopia).

### Religion

- Coptic Christianity and Islam are the primary religions.

### Customs

- Each of the nine ethnic groups will have its own customs and belief practices
- Food - Coptic Christians only eat meat and dairy products for half of the year
- Patriarchal - women are traditionally seen to need protection although this belief is under challenge

### Approach to the health system

- The family may make health decisions collectively. Check with your client how they wish to approach prognosis.
- Concern that too much blood is taken for tests (particularly for pregnant women)
- Hospitalised patients tend to take a passive role
- Eritrean patients may expect the physician to direct their health management

### Traditional health practices

- Illness may be caused by:
  - Disequilibrium between the body and the outside world (either temporal or spiritual)

- Mental equilibrium is considered important to health - giving bad news needs to be handled with this in mind.
- Treatments
  - Herbal medicine is highly developed
  - Spiritual remedies include amulets and ritual
  - Medications are highly valued
  - Injections are thought to be more powerful than oral medications
- Mental illness - attributed to evil spirits:
  - Harm can be inflicted by people with the 'evil eye'
  - May present as somatic complaints

### Gender / Women's health

- Prefer same sex physician
- Female circumcision is practised (irrespective of faith). May include:
  - Slight ritual scarring
  - Clitoridectomy (excision of the clitoris or hood of clitoris)
  - Partial or complete removal of the labia minora
  - Infibulation - excision of the labia minora and inner walls of the majora and sewing together the majora with enough of an opening left for the women to urinate and for menstrual blood.
- Pregnancy and childbirth:
  - A time of increased vulnerability
  - Some mothers may practise a symbolic rejection of the infant
  - Breastfeeding is the norm but some mothers may withhold feeding for 24 hours
- Contraception is not widely available.

### Additional Resources

- African Communities Council - umbrella organisation for African communities Phone: 02 9716 5593
- Translating and Interpreting Service: 131 450
- Transcultural Mental Health Service: +61 2 9840 3800
- NSW Refugee Health Service: +61 2 9828 6600
- STARTTS (Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma) +61 2 9794 1900
- NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service: +61 2 9382 8111
- DAMEC (Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre): +61 2 9281 1991
- Multicultural HIV/AIDS Service: +61 2 9515 3098
- Migrant Resource Centres (for phone numbers see Referral Information) See Further Contacts for a more detailed list of services
- Female Genital Mutilation
  - Auburn Hospital Maternity Unit +61 2 9563 9500
  - Well Women's Clinic, Auburn Community Health Centre +61 2 9646 2233
  - FPA Health, Ashfield +61 2 9716 6099
  - NSW Education Program on FGM +61 2 9840 4101

### References

- This profile was based on the following sources:
  - Consultation with ethno-specific multicultural health workers from

- NSW Health
- o Refugee Health ~ Immigrant Health: Baylor University project on health and culture.
- o Ethnomed: Ethnic Medicine Guide, Harbourview Medical Center, University of Washington

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# The Beja of Eritrea

## Prayer Profile

The Beja are a group of nomadic shepherds who live scattered across the desert regions of Sudan, Egypt, and Eritrea. With a total population of nearly one million, they represent the largest non-Arabic ethnic group between the Nile River and the Red Sea. They are often referred to as the "Fuzzy Wuzzies" because of their enormous crown of knotted hair. They are an aggressive people with small, strong, wiry frames; long noses; and oval faces.



The Beja are the descendants of Noah's grandson, Cush (son of Ham). They are a native African people who have occupied their current homelands for more than 4,000 years. During that time, they mixed with other Arab tribes, adopting their Islamic religion. The 101,000 Beja in Eritrea are divided into two tribes: the Ababda and the Beni Amer. They inhabit approximately 20,000 square miles (50,000 square km) in the northernmost region of the country. In the last decade, thousands have been driven into Sudan because of war and drought.

### What Are Their Lives Like?

The semi-tropical climate of Eritrea is influenced by the hot, dry air from the Sahara and Arabian Deserts. The southern part of the country only gets about four inches (100 mm) of rainfall a year. The Beja migrate with their herds of cattle and camels in search of better grazing land. They have expertise in caring for animals, which is portrayed in their tribal songs and folklore.

The Beni Amer, unlike other Beja tribes, belong to a confederation of nomadic groups that have united as a single political unit. Their social system is unusual because it resembles a "caste" system. Since 1948, the Ethiopian government has strongly discouraged this system.

The Beja nomads live in portable tents that are built by the women. The tents are rectangular in shape and are made of woven, black or gray goat hair. Their daily diet consists of dairy products (especially camel's milk), beef, and some grain. They traditionally wore animal skin clothes; however, today it is more common to wear manufactured clothing. They are dependent on cash to purchase clothes and other desired goods. The Beja's view of the "good life" is to have large herds and to live in green, well-watered pastures.

The Beja are divided into clans. They are named after their ancestors, and the line of descent is traced through the males. Each clan has its own pastures and water sites that may be used by others with their permission. Clans vary from one to twelve families. Disputes between clans are often settled by traditional Beja law; but most day-to-day affairs are managed by the heads of the families. The Beja are a hospitable people, always showing kindness to other clans; however, they are not necessarily friendly to foreigners.

Only the wealthiest Beja have more than one wife. After a marriage contract has been made, a large gift of livestock, clothing, and other goods is given to the bride's family. The goal of young couples is to have many male children and to acquire a great number of female camels.



**What Are Their Beliefs?**

All of the Beja are Muslims; however, they practice what is known as "folk Islam." This can be attributed to the fact that their conversion to Islam was largely motivated by their desire to retaliate against Turkish rulers. Today, their beliefs are interwoven with a rich variety of traditional superstitions. For example, the Beja believe that men have the power to curse others by giving them the "evil eye." They also believe in wicked *jinnis* (spirits capable of taking on animal forms) and other invisible spirits. The Beja believe that evil spirits can cause sickness, madness, and accidents. Black magic is practiced and animal sacrifices are used in sacred pagan ceremonies. They have adopted many Islamic practices such as repeating prayers, but these prayers are often not understood.

**What Are Their Needs?**

Although one missions agency is now targeting this people group, there are still no known Beja believers. Evangelistic tools, added laborers, and increased intercession are the keys to reaching them with the Gospel of Christ.

**Prayer Points**

- Pray against the spirit of Islam mingled with witchcraft that is keeping the Beja bound.
- Ask God to raise up prayer teams that will break up the ground through worship and intercession.
- Pray for God to speed the completion of the Jesus film and other evangelistic materials into the Bedawiye language.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to grant favor to the missions agency that is currently targeting the Beja.
- Pray that God will raise up qualified linguists to translate the Bible into Bedawiye.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to soften the hearts of the Beja toward Christians so that they will be receptive to the Gospel.
- Pray that God will begin revealing Himself to these precious Muslims through dreams and visions.
- Ask the Lord to raise up strong local churches among the Beja by the year 2000.



**See also:**

The Beja of Ethiopia, and Sudan.

**Statistics**

Latest estimates from the World Evangelization Research Center.

**THE PEOPLE**

- **People name:** Beja (Ben Amer)
- **Country:** Eritrea
- **Their language:** Bedawiye
- **Population:** (1990) 88,100  
(1995) 101,000  
(2000) 115,100

- Largest religion: Muslim (Sumi) 100%
- Christians: 0%
- Church members: 0
- Scriptures in their own language: None
- Jesus Film in their own language: None
- Christian broadcasts in their own language: None
- Mission agencies working among this people: 1
- Persons who have heard the Gospel: 13,100 (13%)
- Those evangelized by local Christians: 0 (0%)
- Those evangelized from the outside: 0 (0%)
- Persons who have never heard the Gospel: 87,900 (87%)

### THEIR COUNTRY

- Country: Eritrea
- Population:
  - (1990) 3,081,700
  - (1995) 3,531,400
  - (2000) 4,025,100
- Major peoples in size order:
  - Tigrat 54.4%
  - Tigre 19.6%
  - Danakil 8.1%
  - Bilen 3.5%
  - Beni Amer 2.8%
- Major religions:
  - Muslim 52%
  - Christian 45.9%
  - Ethnic religionist 1.4%
- Number of denominations: 11

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## Chapter VI Medical Practice Vital To Founders Of Babel!

That a competent medical faculty, employing modern techniques to treat present-day diseases, was developed over forty centuries ago by the founders of Babel is an established fact. WHY it was necessary to feverishly build such an extensive practice has yet to be explained! The question of HOW it became a universal practice must also be dealt with here.

### Historical Background at Babel

The Bible and secular records make it clear that the earliest post-flood movement of the human family was down from the mountains of Armenia on to the Mesopotamian plain.

Notice Josephus' recount!

"Now the sons of Noah . . . Shem, Japheth, and Ham . . . first of all descended from the mountains [Armenia] into the plains [Mesopotamia], and fixed their habitation there" (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, I, iv, 1).

With this archaeological background in mind, we may now proceed to the story of the famous leaders who misguided these ancient peoples. Remember, three individuals are indispensable to the origin of medicine in this period: Nimrod, Semiramis (Isis) and Gilgamesh (Horus) — and principally NIMROD!

Nimrod's father was Cush, the oldest son of Ham (Genesis 10:6). Cush, in Hebrew, means black. Nimrod, as the Chinese records reveal, was black — though born of his white mother-wife, Semiramis. The Greek name for Cush was *Aethiops* from which the word *Ethiopia* comes. Cush is the ancestor of the black East Africans!

Cush, a black man, felt discriminated against in a society of predominantly white leadership. Cush initiated the rebellion against God which Nimrod was to so thoroughly pursue. Cush put himself in the place of God. It was especially the Hamitic branch of the human family, under his leadership, that originally determined to rebel against God!

The bitter feelings of inferiority which motivated Cush were later reflected in the behavior of his son Nimrod.

These rebels planned a SEPARATE SOCIETY — in opposition to God's way of life. Disguised as benefactors of mankind, their announced intention was to make a better world — according to their philosophy, not God's. Their ideas are summed up in the words, "one race, one world." Thus the pattern for this world's civilizations was set!

Cush played an important part in the fledgling rebellion. His mark is left on the government, politics, and philosophy of the early dynasty — but he is NOT greatly noted for its medical development!

As noted before, Nimrod is the great patron deity of ancient medicine. Let's notice why!

### NIMROD Leads The Rebellion!

The Babel project was not self-motivating. It arose against God's plan of separating the races. Notice: "Let us build us a city and a tower . . . let us make us a name, LEST WE BE SCATTERED ABROAD upon the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4)!

For a rebellion to be executed to this degree, with such organization and the resources to build a city — it required a master engineer. Nimrod was the mastermind! He fomented the excitement, the contempt for God.

God names things precisely what they are. He called him Nimrod — derived from the Hebrew word *marad* meaning "to rebel." In other words, he was *The Rebel* in history!

Read Genesis 10:8, "he began to be a mighty one in the earth." The words "mighty one" come from the Hebrew *gibber* meaning, not only a warrior, but a tyrant. Moffatt translates this verse: "Ethiopia [Cush] produced Nimrod, the first man on earth to be a DESPOT . . .!"

Nimrod's character is further expressed in verse 9.

We have still to discuss what is probably the most significant phrase of all, a phrase

used twice: Nimrod was a mighty hunter "before the Eternal." This expression, when properly translated, means "in place of the Eternal," or "against the Eternal," or "OPPOSED to the Eternal" (*Exploring Ancient History — The First 2500 Years*, pp. 11-67). Apparently, Nimrod understood the psychology of human nature. He knew how to appeal to the people. He convinced them that happiness and freedom lay in the transgression of God's law. He persuaded the majority of the human family to cooperate in the Babel project!

Nimrod gradually put himself in place of the true God and led his people to believe that under his guidance, they would be out of reach of God's punishment. A rude awakening lay ahead!

### Rebellion Brought a Penalty!

Many historians admit that the practice of medicine is one of the oldest professions on earth — if not the oldest. Few know WHY! There is a reason, which also lies at the bottom of the world's ills today. Medicine was born of necessity!

Long ago, the Creator God revealed a principle which governs the health of all mankind — now, and in Nimrod's age!

And it shall come to pass, IF thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do ALL HIS COMMANDMENTS . . . And all these blessings [including robust physical health] shall come on thee . . . (Deuteronomy 28:1-2).

However, the promise did not end there. It also included a clause for disobedience and rebellion! Mankind was enjoying good health. Nimrod and his followers had not fully counted the cost of SIN — PART OF WHICH IS PHYSICAL SUFFERING THROUGH DISEASE! Sickness is the natural consequence of living contrary to God's way of life. Notice!

But it shall come to pass, IF thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do ALL HIS COMMANDMENTS . . . all these curses shall come upon thee and overtake thee. . . . The Lord shall make the PESTILENCE cleave unto thee until he have consumed thee from off the land, whither thou goest to possess it [virtually no one today lives in the cities Nimrod established]. The Lord shall smite thee with a CONSUMPTION, [tuberculosis], and with a FEVER, and with an INFLAMMATION [rapidly consuming cancer], and with an extreme BURNING [mental anguish]. . . . The Lord will smite thee with the BOTCH OF EGYPT [Elephantiasis, a horrible skin disorder], and with EMERODS and with the SCAB [odd skin diseases], and with the ITCH, whereof thou canst not be healed. The Lord shall smite thee with MADNESS [insanity], and BLINDNESS, and ASTONISHMENT OF HEART [heart attack]. . . . Because thou hearkenest not unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which He commanded thee . . . (Deuteronomy 28:15, 21-22, 27-28, 45).

God knew what would happen when they rebelled. He warned them through Noah and Shem! Nimrod and his rebellious followers KNEW of the prophesied punishment. Sure they did! One reason they built the tower was to protect themselves against another flood! All medical historians note the belief that disease resulted from "an offence to the gods" — SIN — was universal! In Mesopotamia every disease was regarded as DIVINE PUNISHMENT for deliberate or unwitting sin. However, the early founders of civilization did not listen to the warnings, and all nations were ravaged by the "modern" diseases of Deuteronomy 28, as history reveals.

## WHY Medicine Was Developed

Suddenly sickness occurred. *Epidemics struck* — whole cities were immobilized! Epidemic and plague — *in every nation* — is the medical history of the years after Babel. As leader of the rebellion, the one who stood "before" God, it fell Nimrod's lot to deliver the people from disease as he had from wild animals.

As previously quoted, Nimrod "was noted for his expertise in public health work and EPIDEMICS [his kingdom and rulership depended on it]. When the plague visited Keos [Greece] HE WENT THERE and restored the public health. . . ." As we shall see, Nimrod visited many areas of the earth in the interests of medicine.

As new sickness occurred, new drugs had to be found to fight them. This became a frantic, frustrating attempt to thwart the natural penalty of breaking God's law. The race against disease became such a hectic affair that Nimrod-the-physician was renowned for his "admirable ingenuity and quick invention." As Shun, the Chinese physician-god, he is reputed to have discovered as many as *seventy drugs in one day!* Whether this actually occurred is not important. The point is, it vividly shows the impression left on that ancient time of Nimrod's desperate effort to avert God's penalty through MEDICINE!

## Supernatural Intervention

Nimrod's medical efforts met a certain success. For centuries, thereafter, physicians felt confident in the mode of medical practice he established. He became so revered, even the pronouncing of his name at the bedside of the sick was believed to contain great curative power. *Any deviation, from the medical code he established, which failed,* was considered a CAPITAL offense!

"In the letters like those quoted earlier in the thesis the writers expressed perfect confidence in the professional skill and ability of the doctors. . . ." Even today, historians do not hesitate to say "the proportion of cures to deaths of patients appears HIGHER than it is today" (Selwyn-Brown, *The Physician Throughout The Ages*, p. 197).

The question which must be raised, after such a statement, is *how did Nimrod develop a system which produced such a high rate of successful treatment?* The evidence is that he did, but HOW?

The answer to this question is vital to learning the lesson of medical history! Nimrod faced a losing battle against disease. This consequence of their sin had not been foreseen — surely they would be forced back into at least nominal obedience of God's laws. The rebellion was not yet lost!

Babel was Satan's master project in leading the human race away from God in the years immediately after the Flood. He did all in his power to keep it from falling! Satan knew that it is impossible to avoid paying the penalty of transgression. Once man has sinned, there is sure retribution. He also knew certain of the physical penalties can be modified or delayed!

Delaying the penalty would establish the rebellion. Relieving man from the immediate penalty would deceive him into believing his freedom to sin was assured. The tower gave him a sense of security against another flood — *medicine* became assurance against the penalty of disease. The tragic consequences *would be paid*, but later, at a time when mankind was so removed from God, severe suffering alone would not bring them back.

History reveals SATAN led Nimrod to establish the Art of Medicine! The "god of this world" understood the principle of antibiotics! He well knew which substances would have a devastating effect on bacteria. It required no effort on Satan's part to determine the substances which were available for man to use as drugs — it simply had to be revealed!

All available records, secular and Biblical, maintain that the origin of medicine was supernatural. And it was! It is this facet of the early beginnings of medicine, which encrusted with fabulous tradition, have left it open to the charges of mythology! All modern criticism to the contrary, *history remains adamant* — the origin of medicine was "of the gods."

"Almost every nation of antiquity came to refer the origin of Medicine to the IMMEDIATE INSTRUCTION of the gods" (Hamilton, *The History of Medicine, Surgery and Anatomy*, p. 9). Another historian adds, ". . ." but even the gods themselves

condescended to import their therapeutic secrets to mankind" (Mckenzie, *The Infancy of Medicine*, p. 12). Yes, the art of medicine was revealed to man!  
 In spite of such an amazing revelation, historians generally conclude that HOW ancient physicians learned the specific effectiveness of their remedies is of no importance!

When in fact, THIS IS VITAL! The ancients communicated daily with the spirit world. The priest-physicians even contacted "their spirits" for advice in individual cases! As we shall see, it was through this intimate association with the spirit world that ancient physicians could maintain their rate of success.  
*Diagnosis*, in difficult cases, was based on astrology, dreams, auguries, and visions. Basically, there were three divisions in the medical priesthood (using the Mesopotamian names) the *ashipu* or exorcist, the *asu* or physician in the modern sense of the word, and the *azu* or diviner. The latter's chief responsibility was *divination*. He was a medium for visions and knew how to interpret them!

The relationship between doctor and patient went as follows. The patient sought out a physician, as is done today. In difficult cases, all of which were catalogued for future reference, the priest-physician would resort to a *guiding spirit!* As all hospitals were originally temples, this was a simple procedure. The physician then made the prognosis. As both the patient's future and his own fate (per Hammurabi's Code) depended on his findings, *ancient doctors were brutally frank!*

Terse examples of ancient prognosis have been found. "The favourable prognosis was expressed with the words: '[the physician] will cure this disease'; if the prognosis was doubtful: 'Nothing can be done in this case'; or if Unfavourable: 'The patient will die.'" (Castiglioni, *A History of Medicine*, p. 55).

As previously noted, Satan knew that the course of certain diseases could be altered AND he knew which specific substances would have a moderating effect on each ailment. There were some illnesses which could not be halted at all by medication — even as today, physicians freely admit: "There is no cure for the common cold." Many times the patient heard the dreaded report of imminent death. No hope was held out on the basis of experimentation, as ancient doctors were not allowed to freelance through trial and error with their medications.  
 The Bible records an example of just such doctor-patient reliance on the supernatural as late as 892 B.C.

And Ahaziah fell down through a lattice in his upper chamber . . . and was sick; and he sent messengers, and said unto them, Go, enquire of BALZEBUB the god of Ekron whether I shall recover of this disease. (II Kings 1:2).

Ahaziah's servants were sent to the priest-physician of the temple in Ekron. In such matters, a priest was always the mediator between Satan and man. The priest was to *then inquire* as to WHETHER Ahaziah could be healed with their medications or was doomed to die. In this case, the God of the Bible intervened to foretell the outcome: "Thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die" (verse 4).  
 All diagnosis and treatment in ancient history, to the age of Hippocrates, was based on supernatural revelation!

## Nimrod — Spirit Possessed!

Keep in mind — Babel was Satan's master plot to lead man astray. The direction that civilization was to go was revealed through its leaders. SATAN first revealed the knowledge of medicine after the Flood through Nimrod, the great physician! "It is no exaggeration to say that science [medicine] owes most to the shining individualism of a few chosen spirits" (Garrison, *History of Medicine*, p. 45). There is more truth to this statement than meets the eye!  
 Greek history records of Dionysus or Nimrod: "His medical practices were derived from his powers of PROPHECY AND INSPIRATION . . ." (Selwyn-Brown, *The Physician Throughout The Ages*, p. 67). This phenomenon is also preserved in Indian history where it is believed that Brahma, the creator god and personification of the world spirit (Satan), transmitted *medical knowledge* in the earliest times to Atri — Nimrod!

*The Chinese History Of Nimrod (Shun) adds more understanding to how medical knowledge became available to mankind. The Chinese Classics by James Legge, volume III, part 1, page 115, reveals China's first physician was a black man — Nimrod. Furthermore, he is depicted as having eyes that shone with "double brightness". In modern terminology, Chinese history has retained a unique description of the facial appearance of a demon possessed person!*

His condition, recognized worldwide, is further substantiated by the Egyptian name for Nimrod — *Osiris*. *Osiris* has the meaning of many eyed or overseer. Today, we would call such a person clairvoyant.

"This term or title 'Osiris' implies one having unusual powers of perception. The traditional sense of this word is that it refers to a person who has many eyes to see that things are done right" (*Exploring Ancient History — The First 2500 Years*, p. 11-91).

Based on the Biblical description, it could have been assumed Nimrod was in this spiritual condition. These accounts, however, provide concrete, historical proof! The POINT IS, Satan used Nimrod to insure the effective commencement of a medical practice at Babel — 4000 years ago!

### Medical Practice Universal!

The occurrence of a competent medical practice in ancient societies is universal. Hence, they [prescriptions] were recorded in writing at an early date, and in ALL ancient civilizations medical texts are found among the oldest literary documents preserved" (Sigerist, *A History of Medicine*, p. 21).

HOW did a similar system of medicine, one based on drug therapy and surgery as directed by the spirit world, become common to all nations?

As previously quoted, "Isis, Osiris, and Horus were UNIVERSALLY worshipped even beyond the boundaries of Egypt." The early inhabitants of the Indus Valley, principally Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, possessed "a large number of statues of a woman alone or with a child. . . . Serpent and dove are her attributes. . . . This is the GREAT MOTHER, the goddess worshipped all over the Near and Middle East. . . . In the Indus Valley she was apparently worshipped in every home" (*ibid.*, p. 141).

The culture of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa flourished in the second to third millennium B.C. — thus were contemporary with The Old Kingdom of Egypt. The great Mother Goddess of India was none other than Isis or SEMIRAMIS!

This trinity of healing gods was known intimately throughout Europe and the Middle East — and generally around the world. "Historical researches have shown that there is an identity of all forms of ancient social and MEDICAL CUSTOMS, and a unity of all folk ways. Man's instinctive actions, in all countries. . . . tend to converge to a common point" (Selwyn-Brown, *The Physician Throughout The Ages*, p. 25).

That common point is the Middle East and the building of the Tower of Babel, 2256-2254 B.C. NIMROD was its principal purveyor!

Apollo was the Homeric god of medicine; but it was *Askelpios* who was the real healer of men. Both are two of the many names of NIMROD. Today he is the real emblematic god of healing, whose portrait and twin serpents appear on all doctors' seals, diplomas, charters and books. HE IT WAS who presided over a great healing cult that developed into a WORLD-WIDE ORGANIZATION which for centuries. . . . conferred great benefits upon the world (*ibid.*, p. 54).

As the threat of disease expanded, the demand for new, more powerful drugs increased. Egyptian doctors were eager to obtain new plants with healing properties. The need for additional medication forced the importation of drugs from foreign countries.

Drug traffic had begun! In the *Ebers Papyrus* we find prescriptions calling for cinnamon, pepper, and ginger. Seemingly common agents, these spices grew thousands of miles distant from the Nile — in *China, India, and Ceylon*. These are but a few examples of the valuable drugs and minerals, which were imported from afar. However, they represent *telling evidence* of the intense interest in procuring medicines from every possible source!

Nimrod, himself, began this practice! This is precisely the reason Chinese annals record him being in their country to thoroughly analyze indigenous plants and herbs. The result was he may have discovered some seventy drugs in one day. Obviously, his search for new medicine was frantic!

Apparently, Nimrod traveled to the far reaches of the earth to locate sources for new drugs and to *instruct local leaders in the art of medicine*. History specifies that he not only attended to the medical needs of Mesopotamia and Egypt, but he also TAUGHT HIS ART to adjacent peoples!

Again notice the Greek record:

Medicine and surgery . . . came to Greece through a long line of other civilized peoples from a remote antiquity. Dionysus [Nimrod] was the god of . . . health and healing. Born in Thebes and *bringing to Greece the customs, lore, and science of his native Egypt*, he settled on the slopes of Mount Nysa . . . Later on, he set out on a TRIP AROUND THE WORLD TO TEACH . . . (*ibid.*, p. 208).

Sometime after the erection of the Tower of Babel, while the building of the city was still in progress, God scattered the rebellious people abroad.

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded . . . this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language . . . So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth . . . (Genesis 11:5-8).

Nimrod's worldwide excursion, *taken some time after the dispersion of the nations*, was significant to the old world! It revived the breath of rebellion and renewed his dominion. Arriving *in person* among the scattered peoples, his trip helped to further establish the way of life initiated at Babel — also helping to set the uniform pattern in *medical practice* evidenced worldwide!

Notice a partial record of this trip:

OSIRIS moreover built Thebes in Egypt . . . They say that Osiris was much given to *husbandry* [including the medical properties of plants and herbs] . . . called by the Greek Dionysus . . .

He was honored under the name Hermes as:

One of an admirable ingenuity and quick invention in *finding out what might be useful to mankind*. It is reported that Osiris, being a prince of a publick spirit and very ambitious of glory, raised a great army with which he resolved to go through all parts of the world that were inhabited and to TEACH MEN . . . For he hoped that if he could *civilize men* . . . by such a public good and advantage, he should raise a Foundation among all mankind for his immortal praise and honor.

Having settled his affairs in Egypt and committed the government of his kingdom to his wife Isis . . . Then marching out of Egypt, he began his expedition. He marched away through ETHIOPIA . . . every country received him for his merits and virtues as a god [his prowess was remembered from Babel]. Thence he passed through ARABIA . . . to INDIA and the UTMOST COASTS [records indicate this included CHINA] that were inhabited. He built many cities in India. . . He left *likewise many other marks of his being in those parts* [including a medical practice as the histories of those nations record] . . . Thence passing to the rest of ASIA, he transported his army . . . into EUROPE.



To conclude, Osiris having traveled through THE WHOLE WORLD, by finding out . . . what was fit and convenient for man's body, was a *benefactor to all mankind*. He brought back with him into Egypt the most precious and richest things that every place did afford [of course the knowledge of new drugs] (Williams, *The Historians' History of The World*, pp. 281-283).

Medical knowledge was essential to the founders of Babel. *Without it, their rebellion was doomed to failure! Mankind would have been forced back to obedience to God. SATAN'S intervention through Nimrod preserved the rebellion. Nimrod's historic, worldwide trip served to perpetuate the confusion and provide a semblance of unity to "all forms of ancient social and MEDICAL CUSTOMS!"*

Chapter 7 Conclusion  
[Return to Main Menu](#)

## ETHIOPIAN SCROLLS: A Disembodied Aesthetic of Dispossession

Ethiopian culture seems to be a mixture of various Afro-Asiatic groups, uniting the Christian, Semitic and Muslim worlds. The origins of its religions and culture are multiplicitous, but what it takes from each of its sources appears to be consistent with belief in the power of the word and the power of the image as an aesthetic antidote and transformer (to borrow from Hackett). It is perhaps easiest to identify the Byzantine Christian origins in the scrolls and the Islamic origins. At first sight, it may be harder to identify the African origins. Yet, as Hackett suggests, the African roots may be stronger than the Islamic or Christian and more fundamental to the curative rituals associated with the scrolls. Which is not to say that Islam or Christianity do not have comparable beliefs in spiritual healing, but the symbolic embodiment of the Ethiopian aesthetic, and the aesthetic of dispossession, is, I think, fundamentally different from Christian and Islamic spiritual aesthetics.

Some of the healing mechanisms of the Ethiopian scrolls are common to healing arts in many cultures:

hypothesis: a spiritual presence exists in an image of spirituality, like the imprint of a stamp in wax. This is not presentification because it is not believed that the image is making the spirit present and because we are speaking here about images of gods or saints who have been visualized and have a recognizable, almost stable, form—we are speaking about icons. What hypostasis means, then, is that the image (the icon) has the power to heal in the same way as the saint or god or represented spirit can. In a sense, the image has a quality of "transparency" since it cannot be worshiped for itself but for what it represents. Transparency—meaning that one can see or feel the powers through the image, that the image is a veil; it will not show the marks of an individual artist's style or identity because that would make the image exist more completely or fully as an image. An artist makes the iconic image but without calling attention to him/herself. There's an odd parallel to this in Chinese Buddhism. A statue of Buddha is thought of as a "shadow" or veil of Buddha until it has been given pupils, until its eyes are opened. To carry the analogy further, perhaps when the statue's eyes are opened, it presentifies Buddha, but before that it is an icon of Buddha with hypostatic powers. (Note that I am making up this parallel instance of presentification; I don't think you will find any book that talks about presentification in Chinese culture.)

The power of mimesis (imitation) can be applied to evil as well as to good, but in terms of evil images, there are two possible outcomes; the image of evil might render harm, but in contrast, the image of evil might repel an evil spirit.

At the basis of Ethiopian religious beliefs is belief in the power of the word-names for newborns are submitted to clerics who determine if the name will bring fortune; like Muslims, Ethiopians believe that one's name fixes one's destiny. This belief derives from a story of ancient people, of each nation having a book which would reveal the secrets of heaven; the only group not to lose theirs was the Christians and so they are the only people who know how the universe works.

[Remember that myths do not have to be true or consistent with some external logic in order to be believed; it is the belief in a myth which makes it a potent element in a culture and in the aesthetics of that culture.]

Hypostasis, mimesis, and the power of the word are not unique to Ethiopian healing arts. What is most unique to the Ethiopian scrolls as a form of healing is the power of the eyes, the power of the gaze.

### The scrolls and the process of healing:

A person feels threatened or feels the presence of a demon within; he seeks the help of a cleric (a person with religious training). Just as the Fon and the Baule people initiate the preparation of a boccie statue or spirit statue, and just as you may initiate treatment of an illness by going to the doctor, the Ethiopian initiates preparation of the scroll. Curing involves the preparation of a scroll for the individual, a scroll which is often longer than the length of the person's body; it begins and ends with images drawn by the cleric, and in-between the images, the cleric writes prayers with the name of the patient inserted. People will carry their scrolls with them when they feel threat; may unroll them and hang them in a secure place or just carry them and unroll them when necessary. This is the beginning, but the healing has not yet happened. When cured, the scroll may be sealed but the person may still carry it around. The scroll may be passed on to someone else; the writing will be changed to reflect the name of the new owner.

### What do we see on the scrolls?



eyes

serpents becoming crosses and triangles

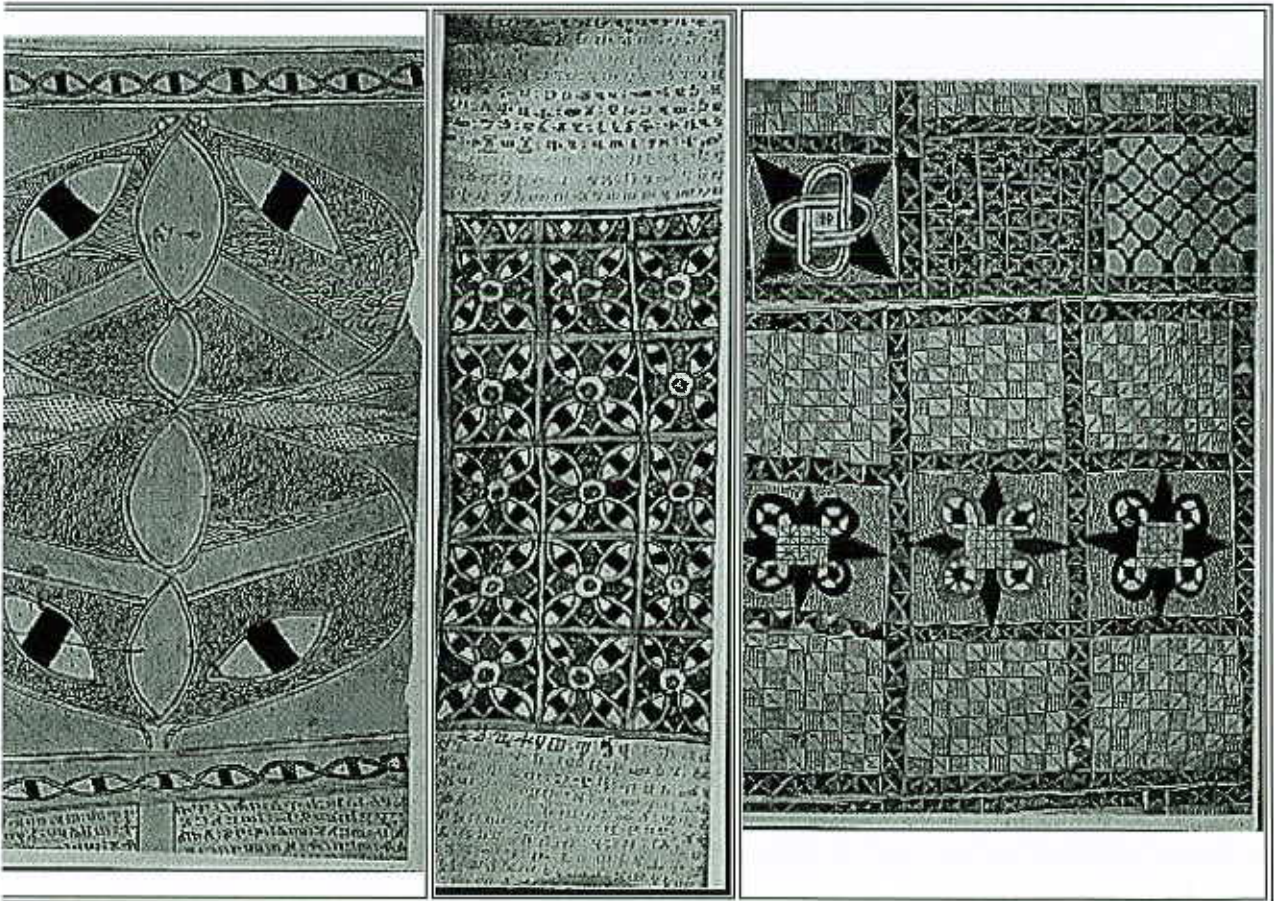
crosses becoming triangles

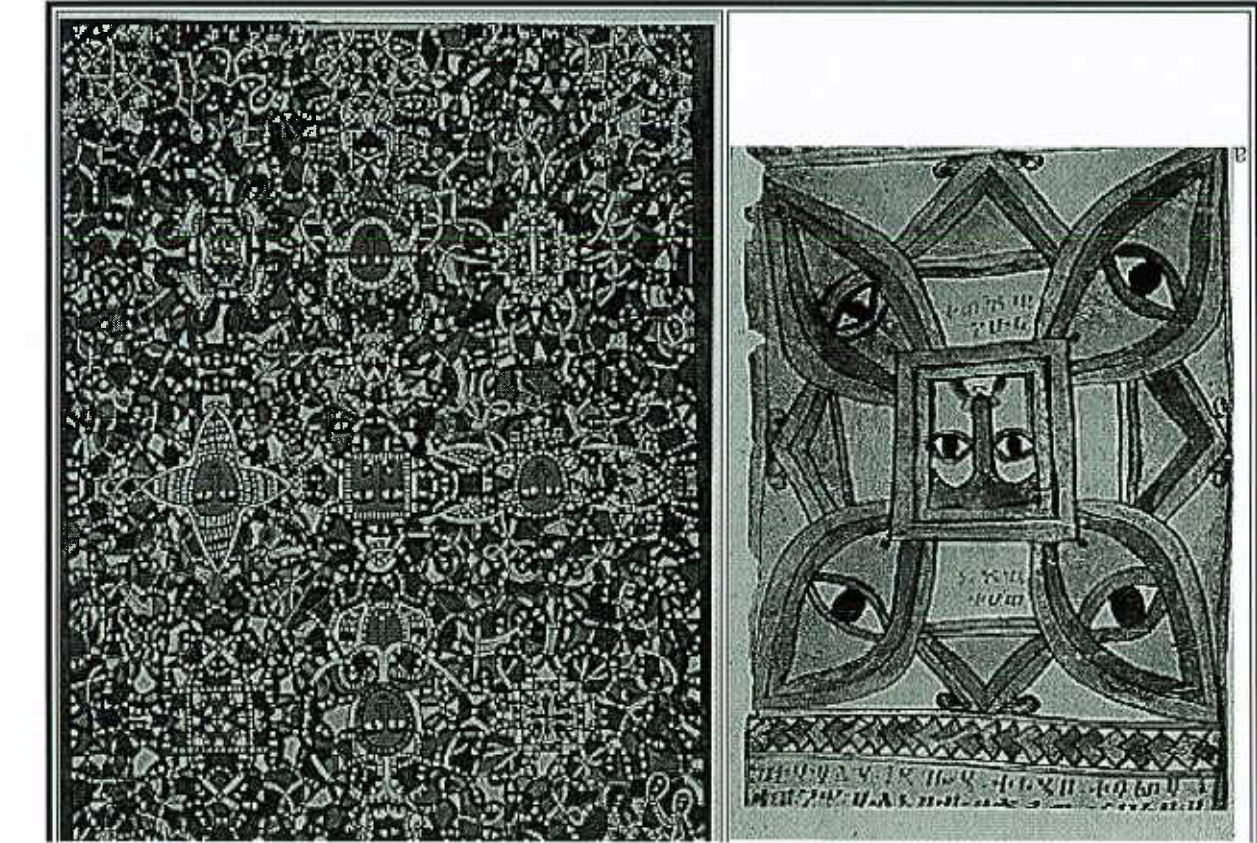
eyes

networks of grids

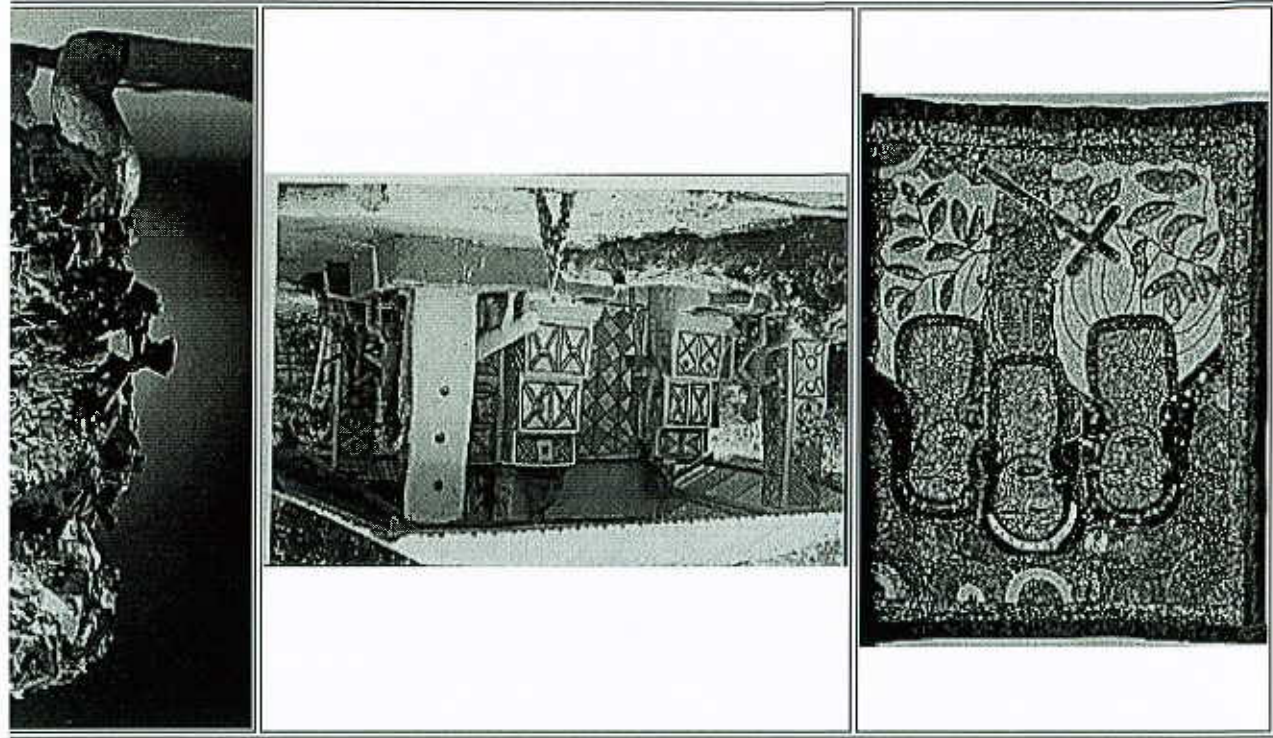
crosses interlaced with circles

The eyes and face of divinity





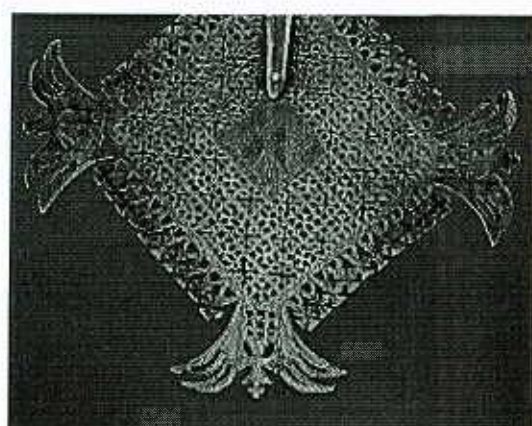
What we see are images becoming words. Almost the opposite of the bible, where the word becomes the image, here the image becomes the word. Becomes the word and calls on the gods. The scrolls are writing, and it is because they are writing, that the surfaces are so intensely filled. We don't see emptiness. In fact, in most of the African art forms we will look at, we will not see emptiness.

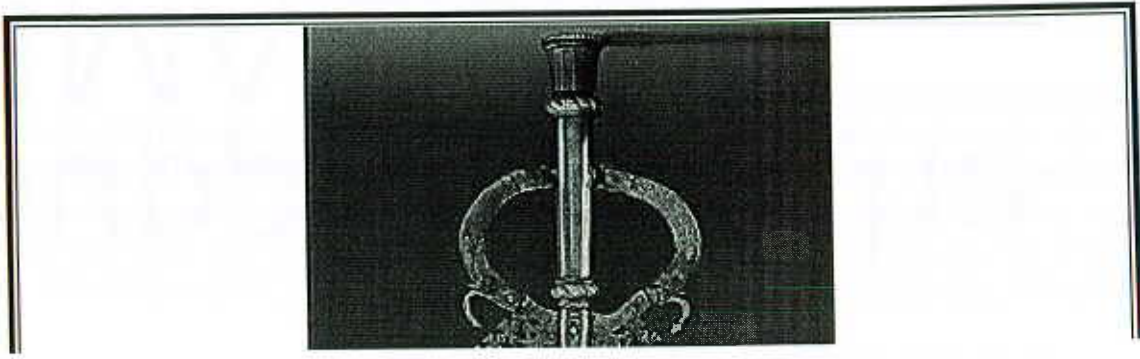


We don't see it in Haitian vodou flags; we don't see it on the walls of the Igbo mbari; and we don't see it on the Kongo nkisi. We have talked about the surfaces of the body; we have seen how they are encrusted with attachments and blood and the words of sorcery. The surface of the scroll is also encrusted with words, words as images. Why are empty spaces so hard to find in these forms of African art? The surfaces visualize the act of calling on the gods, they create a barrier to the entrance of evil, they visualize the act of solving or excising problems.

The images on the scrolls may be called talismans. The recurring symbols in the talismans relate to symbols of divination, found in other African cultures, to a widespread belief in African cultures that writing has spiritual power, and in the Ethiopian scrolls, they also relate to Christian beliefs about the word and to Islamic beliefs in the power of the written word. Both Christianity and Islam share a belief that writing comes from God. Because the name of God was the origin of writing, in a sense, the name of God is the origin of the talismanic image. Every talisman seems to have originated in the cross because the cross is ultimately the sign of God's name; in the scrolls, the ubiquitous 8-pointed star is the seal of the Father and the sign of the cross, and the union of Father and Son represents a victory over Satan and death; this underlies the use of the word "cross" in inscriptions on the scroll, almost as a form of address to a savior.

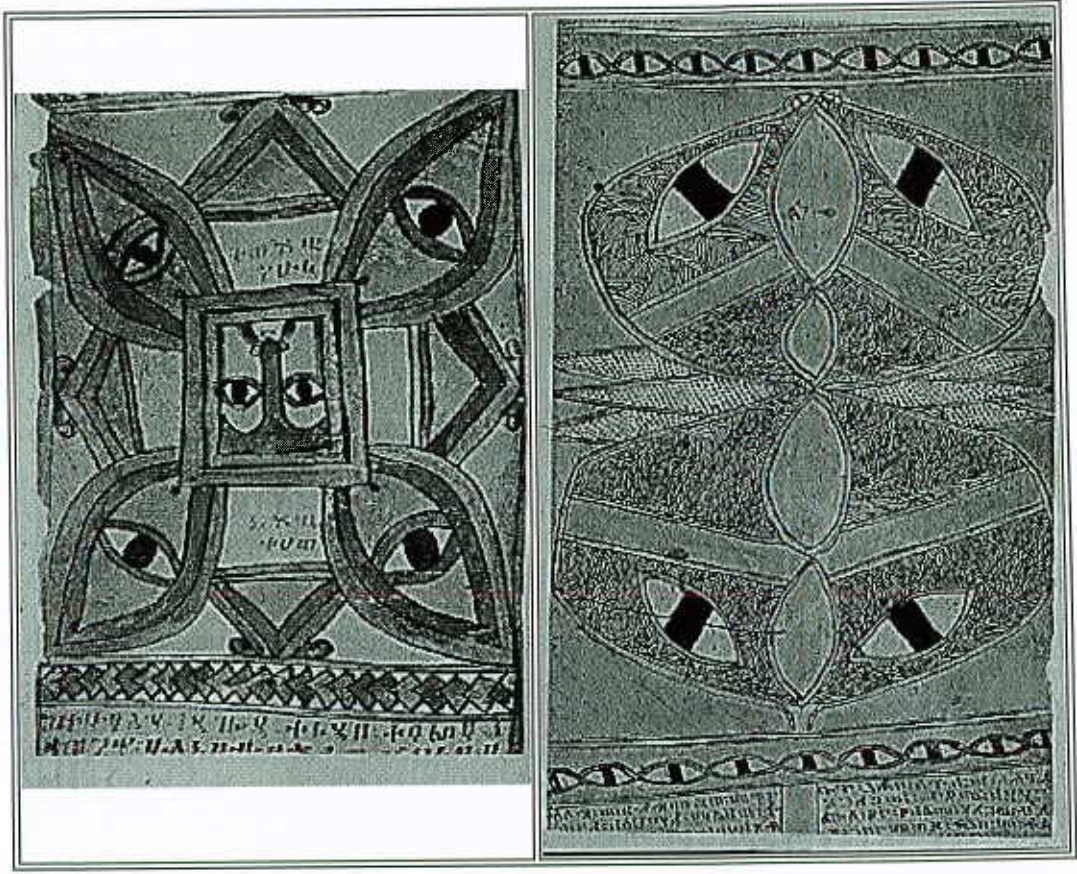
**the cross:**  
 is conceptualized as medicine, used in much the same way as holy water; as an image it has two derivations: symbolizing the seal of Christ, and evoking the blood of Christ which was spilled on the wood of the cross, or the idea of sacrifice;  
 visually, the two perpendicular arms of the cross have generated a foliated or interlaced structure which almost obscures the traditional form. We can relate the form of the cross to a story about the tree of Paradise but more important is our recognition that the cross visually becomes the talisman on the scroll; and the scroll continues to "be" a cross.  
 A 14<sup>th</sup> century cross which has assumed some of the characteristics of the scroll:





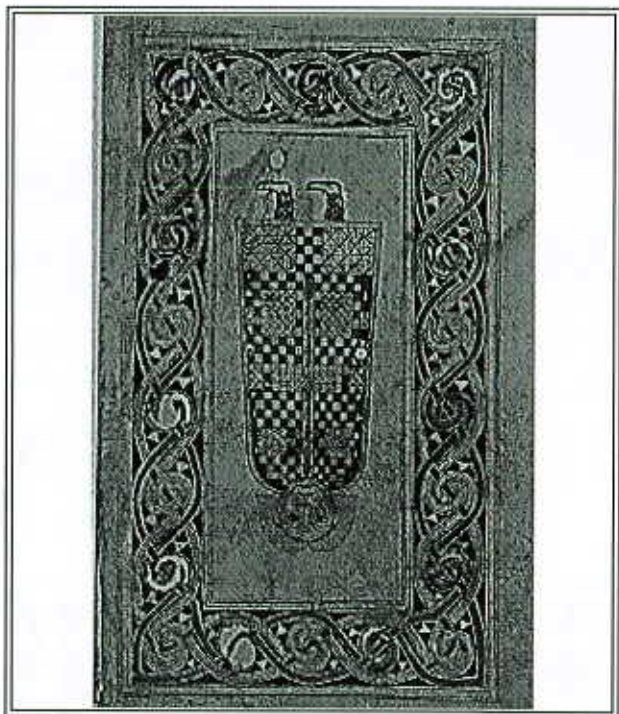
**the eyes in the scroll images and the power of the gaze:**

heads and eyes may be rendered without a body but they are contained within a pattern and positioned in such a way that we read them as eyes; the space of the pattern overall reads as a cross or as Solomon's seal—the effect is to suggest a body but the eyes are exaggeratedly large within this body

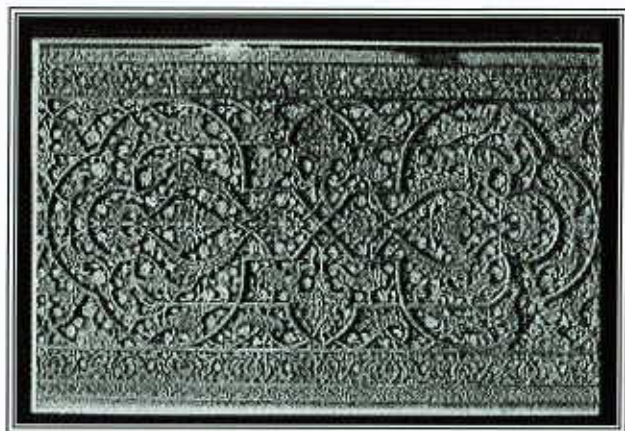


The words of the scroll pronounce the name of god and serve as a spiritual healing through language; the eyes in the image do not repeat the words but function as a guard, surveying the space around the person who holds and views the image; in this sense, the image does not illustrate the text but functions as a second or parallel source of magic .

Here we have an illumination which seems to combine the qualities of the previous "textile" images with the framed religious icon; in this combination we perhaps best perceive the source of the Ethiopian talismans.



One last influence,  
an Islamic tombstone carving:

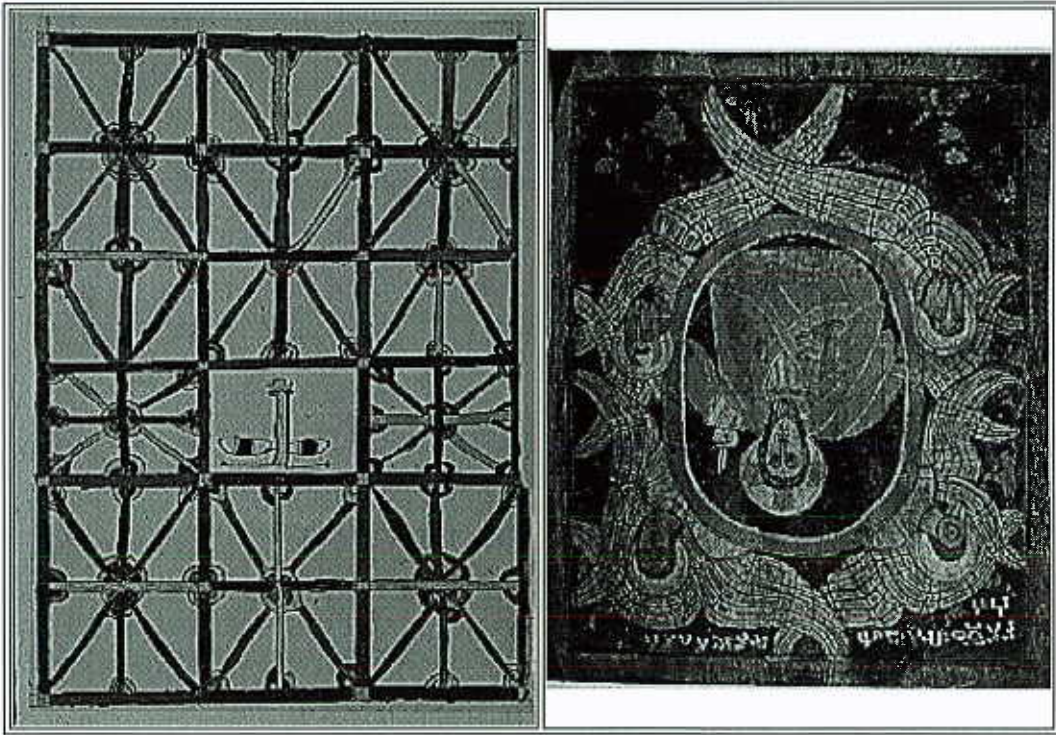


This we might hold in mind when we look at Ethiopian processional crosses although it is certainly not the only influence.

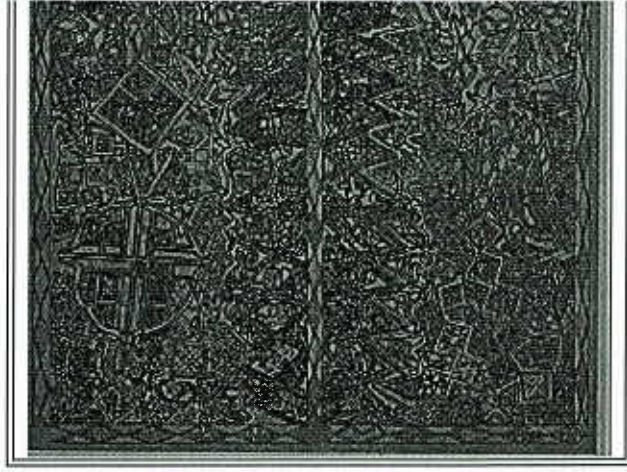
## Scrolls:



This icon (on the left, below) is a panel painting, not a scroll. The style here is much closer to the medieval manuscripts and the imagery is readily recognizable as Christian. We might therefore postulate a sequence in which the medieval Christian imagery is first adopted in a manner that remains rather close to the source, is later infused with more Islamic decorative and aesthetic motifs, all of which is then joined with more indigenous African motifs, particularly of the Kongo aesthetic, to find expression in a healing/religious art which is visually and culturally idiosyncratic.



The scroll on the right is entitled Seven uprights and Seven rungs. The vertical lines are the uprights and the horizontals are the rungs. The clustered images or nodal points are locks and together the image suggests the barriers and obstacles which will protect the owner of the talisman from the enemy. The talisman is a decoy and trap as well as a barrier.



A disembodied aesthetic of dispossession. Or another way to describe it: an aesthetic of dispossession with symbolic embodiment: I think the dispossession part is easy to understand. Symbolic embodiment: the scroll symbolizes the person it is made for. It is the height of that person, it carries the name of that person. The scroll also symbolizes the body of divinity--the eyes and the face of the disappearing/reappearing divinity who will chase away evil. In the end, it may also symbolize the body of evil: the scroll ingests the person, ingests the demon so it can free the person, and ingests itself. The dense surface imagery is the scroll absorbing and reabsorbing its own body. The act of embodiment is as much a part of the symbol as the body. In this, we might relate the scroll to the psychological aesthetic of the boie and the way in which the boie becomes a surrogate for the human being. The scroll absorbs evil and then uses the evil to repel evil. The human being had already absorbed the demon and now excises it.

A recent example, from 1991, called Scissors: the cross hatching down the middle signifies the scissors which in Ethiopian is maqas. The m of this word stands for the word for earth; the q signifies the word for word; and the s stands for the sky. Together they denote the word of god which can cut flames and cut spirits.

