

“Heard about the Good-Deed-Sayers?” Islam and everyday conversations on religious difference in Harar, Ethiopia

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Abstract

In this article, I take the absence of public religious debates, sermons and of displays of piety as a starting point to explore the ambiguous ways in which people in the Ethiopian city of Harar express religious difference through everyday talk. Drawing on two specific social situations, daily morning strolls and afternoon *čāt*¹ chewing sessions, I illustrate that Harari men claim, maintain and strengthen religious affiliation and difference through acts of exclusion and self-identification in the form of chit-chat, gossip and artful narratives. Given that Harar is considered an important centre of Islam at the Horn of Africa, I frame the religious issues at stake in relation to changes in the religious and political landscape of Ethiopia since the nineteen-nineties that have influenced religious discord and triggered strong identity politics among ethnic groups in the city. Against this background, I investigate social consequences and strategies of avoidance among Harari men who are anxious to be the target of gossip and backbiting.

1 *Čāt* is a plant indigenous to the horn of Africa. It is a mild amphetamine-like stimulant.

Introduction

One of the most incisive policy measures implemented by the new Ethiopian government after toppling the socialist regime in 1991 has been to stipulate religious freedom in the constitution. The political change had important and highly appreciated consequences for Muslims in Ethiopia, who had been widely marginalised by former regimes. For the first time, they were offered a space for political participation, self-organisation, and for negotiating religious issues. At the same time, new Muslim activists gained public presence. Often associated by the wider public with Salafiyya or Wahhabiyya ideologies, they triggered new debates within Muslim communities concerning correct religious practices and conduct because of their denouncement of shrine pilgrimage and saint veneration as (traditional) “cultural” or “un-Islamic” practice. After the government, in turn, had accused them of fueling violent confrontation between Muslims and Christians, a public debate ensued on the question of what constitutes an Ethiopian Muslim identity.²

In early 2003, during my research on the contemporary role of saint veneration in the city of Harar,³ I was struck that neither the described ruptures within Muslim communities nor conflicts between Christians and Muslims in many regions of Ethiopia did not have much impact on local urban religious life. Contemporary Harar is a multi-

2 See: Jon Abbink, “Religion in public spaces: Emerging Muslim-Christian polemics in Ethiopia,” *African Affairs*, 110/439, 2011, pp. 253-274; Jon Abbink, “Religious freedom and the political order: the Ethiopian ‘secular state’ and the containment of Muslim identity politics,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 8, 3, 2014, pp. 346-365; Patrick Desplat and Terje Østebø (eds.), *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism* (New York: Palgrave, 2013) and Terje Østebø, “Salafism, state-politics, and the question of ‘extremism’ in Ethiopia,” *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 8, 1-2, 2014, pp. 165-184.

3 This article is based on research conducted in Harar between 2003 and 2007 (altogether a total of 14 months). An article that refers to the diverse languages in Ethiopia used by Muslims – mainly Arabic, Harari and Amharic – poses considerable challenges regarding uniform transliteration. To ensure consistency, I adopted a simplified transliteration of these languages. With regard to Harari, I usually consulted the work of Leslau. See: Wolf Leslau, *Etymological Dictionary of Harari* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963) and Wolf Leslau, *Ethiopians Speak: Studies in Cultural Background. I. Harari*, vol. 7 of *Near Eastern Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).

ethnic and multi-religious city,⁴ but it is also considered to be one of the most important Islamic centres in the Horn of Africa. However, when it came to Muslim activists, most people in Harar had a relaxed attitude toward the so-called ‘Wahhabis,’ who were either non-existent or a small number, always hiding their religious attitude. It seemed at first sight that Muslim activists or reform did not have any impact on the public sphere and that established religious practices, particularly associated with shrines and saint veneration, went on unharmed as if they had been practiced forever. Moreover, open discussions concerning correct religious practices or doctrine were absent, while public signs of Muslim piety were rare. During the usual morning stroll along the narrow streets, people may point towards the increase of Muslim fashion, in particular the Pakistani style, or the rate of prayer marks on the forehead. However, instead of considering these signs as a display of piety, people start to mock the passers-by behind their backs that they try to compensate for their lack of religious knowledge by their masquerade. Still, these remarks on the performance of others were rather casual or even humorous, similar to the disapproval of one’s appreciation of a particular football team.

In general, there has been no open discourse on Islam as an ethical project, nor a debate about secular ideas or how religion should be implemented in the public sphere. Muslims in Harar attend prayers at the mosques, they fast regularly and send their children to schools where they learn basic knowledge of Islam, even though these are hardly signs of an emerging Muslim activism like what’s being observed in other regions of Ethiopia. If people do not “do” religion to express that they are more pious than others, politicians in Harar correspondingly have never stopped to explain what the city is not, namely a blooming urban milieu of Islamic radicalism and fundamentalism. Instead, politicians were eager to clarify that Harar cultivated a peaceful, tolerant and moderate Islam

4 According to the latest figure available (2007), Harar has approximately 100,000 inhabitants (40.5% Amhara, 28.1% Oromo, 11.8% Harari, 7.9% Gurage, and 6.8% Somali) of different religious backgrounds (48.5% Orthodox Christians, 44.5% Muslims, and 6.1% Protestants). Muslims are mostly Sunnīs of the Shāfi‘ī school of law.

which has nothing to do with extreme variants of Muslim faith (amhar. *akrari islemena be'ethiopia*, "Islamic extremism in Ethiopia").

In fact, many people in Harar were involved in debates about religious conduct and ethics – but never in public. Discussions about religion might of course have happened in religious circles of scholars or in educational spaces, but the most vibrant and emotional talk was articulated in confident, intimate and trustworthy face-to-face friendship circles during the daily afternoon *čāt* chewing sessions (har. *bārčā*). Under the influence of *čāt*, simple everyday observations evolved into an emotional, heated discussion about the conduct and commitments of others, something that people would not normally do during their morning strolls or in coffee shops. People fell easily into bittersweet nostalgia about a lost past of Muslim virtue, while lamenting about its contemporary decline. Of course, nobody would ever have claimed to be a "good Muslim" while at the same time slandering other Muslims for their incorrect religious practices, wicked ideas, and immoral attitudes.

Why is it important to consider intimate everyday talk and casual gossip of ordinary people under the influence of a mild stimulant as a relevant religious discourse and even as an efficient means of symbolic boundary work? During the last decade, research on Muslims has been considerably attentive towards the cultivation of piety, morality and self-discipline as well as the question of how Muslims transfer religious values into practice while facing the challenges of their ethical project towards secularism. Spearheaded by Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind,⁵ the newfound paradigm informed a multitude of research with a similar focus.⁶ This body of scholarship has been highly innovative since it sheds

5 See: Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) and Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

6 See: Lara Deeb, "Piety politics and the role of a transnational feminist analysis," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15, s1, 2009, pp. S112-S126; Jeanette Jouili, "Negotiating secular boundaries: Pious micro-practices of Muslim women in French and German public spheres," *Social Anthropology*, 17, 4, 2009, pp. 455-470 and Gregory M. Simon, "The soul freed of cares? Islamic prayer, subjectivity, and the contradictions of moral selfhood in Minangkabau, Indonesia," *American Ethnologist*, 36, 2, 2009, pp. 258-275.

new light on anthropological questions of embodiment, agency, ethics, personhood and the question of how Muslims engage, and sometimes struggle, with their religion in an active process of self-cultivation. At the same time, several scholars criticised this type of conceptualising Muslims' life-worlds as too rigid.⁷ Most authors argue that the perspective on religious discipline and self-fashioning represents only a small fraction of Muslims, while at the same time neglecting other, non-religious aspects of individuals' lives and subjectivities. Moreover, they claim that a juxtaposition of Muslim piety to secular forms of self and agency are too stern, often even ill-founded.

The most radical, thought-provoking critique has been forwarded by Samuli Schielke who reasons that there is "too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam."⁸ A perspective on a piety movement stands for a particular version of Islam (reformism, rationalism) that excludes most Muslims, who are sometimes pious, sometimes not, as "they argue for discipline at times and for freedom at others, but often live lives that lack both."⁹ Schielke favours an account that takes the complexities and inherent ambiguities of everyday life as a starting point to understand Muslim lives. He opts for a more balanced view on people's lives that includes fragmented, situational, often controversial aspects of everyday life as well as the promising prospects of religious grand schemes.¹⁰

This contribution focusses on talk and discussions of ordinary people during *bārĉa*, the afternoon *ĉāt* session, to explore how Muslims in Harar position themselves towards others in a social space of everyday life. My

7 See: Sindre Bangstad, "Saba Mahmood and anthropological feminism after virtue," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 28, 3, 2011, pp. 28-54; Amira Mittermaier, "Dreams from elsewhere: Muslim subjectivities beyond the trope of self-cultivation," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 18, 2, 2012, pp. 247-265 and Samuli Schielke, "Second thoughts about the anthropology of Islam, or how to make sense of grand schemes in everyday life," *Zentrum Moderner Orient Working Papers*, 2, 2010. Retrieved December 23, 2016, from http://www.zmo.de/publikationen/WorkingPapers/schielke_2010.pdf.

8 Schielke, "Second thoughts about the anthropology of Islam," p. 11.

9 Ibid, p. 2-3.

10 See: Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec, *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion*, vol. 18 of *European Association of Social Anthropologists* (New York: Berghahn, 2012).

analysis centres on gossip, chit-chat, artful narratives and rumours about Muslims' lives which serve as an efficient way of making, maintaining and changing symbolic boundaries insofar as everyday talk and religious difference are mutually constitutive. At the same time, this perspective opens new ways to investigate people's everyday lives, including their daily uncertainties and anxieties.

Some Remarks on Gossip and Power in Harar

I argue that everyday talk of ordinary people is not less important than ritualistic practices, Friday mosque sermons and substantive Islamic knowledge of religious scholars. Of course, many of my informants were not familiar with the difficulties of theological argument, yet, that does not make their chit-chat less valuable socially. Gossiping and backbiting, for example, are an important element in Harar's everyday life and an effective means of constructing and rethinking moral values based on true or untrue information about absent people or events. It is mostly evaluative talk, thus drawing boundaries and defining who is in and who is out. For several decades, social science studies have examined the role, function and purpose of gossip.¹¹ Gossip has been perceived as producing social cohesion and controlling deviant behaviour without direct confrontation, and thereby reinforcing community norms and constraining individual conduct¹² but also purposeful and manipulative from an individual's perspective.¹³ To be sure, gossiping as such cannot

11 See: Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, "The vindication of gossip," in Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze'ev (eds.), *Good Gossip*, 11-24 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Jörg R. Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip* (New York: de Gruyter, 1993); Niko Besnier, *Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009); Charlotte De Backer, "Like Belgian chocolate for the universal mind: Interpersonal and media gossip from an evolutionary perspective" (PhD Dissertation, Ghent University, 2005); Ulf Hannerz, "Gossip, networks and culture in a Black American ghetto," *Ethnos*, 32, 1-4, 1967, pp. 35-60; John Morreall, "Gossip and humor," in Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze'ev (eds.), *Good Gossip*, 56-64 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994) and Patricia Meyer Spacks, "In praise of gossip," *The Hudson Review*, 35, 1, 1982, pp. 19-38.

12 Max Gluckman, "Gossip and scandal," *Current Anthropology*, 4, 1963, pp. 307-316.

13 Robert Paine, "What is gossip about? An alternative hypothesis," *Man*, 2, 2, 1967, pp. 278-285.

be considered to be an Islamic practice. It is condemned by religious doctrine and by most Harari as immoral (in Harari someone who gossips is called *fässow zäyqātri*, literally; “someone who does not tie his fart”). Yet, gossiping is of utmost interest for everyone in Harar, and is done with great enthusiasm and enjoyment, whether it is for the sake of exchange of information, or for its cathartic function such as in the form of jokes and humour.¹⁴ Although gossip or talk about religion has serious undertones with severe possible consequences for the victim, people love to participate in it.

The convincing influence of gossip as well as casual chit-chat and grand narratives in Harar should not be mistaken as powerful instruments of the weak, or practices of resistance and subversion. This article on talk and afternoon *çāt* chewing practices offers a description of everyday life among the Harari community, a small but also powerful and prestigious minority. They are the descendants of local groups and Arab immigrants and claim to be the founders of the city. Although the Harari have largely lost their economic and religious dominance over the last few decades, they were guaranteed political rights to administer the Harari People’s National Regional State (HPNRS) in 1995, therefore ruling over the majorities of (Muslim) Oromo and (Christian) Amhara. For Ethiopia, this is a unique and continuously debated decision. Although granted with political power, the Harari usually feel threatened by other groups due to their small number, but also because of their cultural and historical background. In fact, power and resistance are always entangled in obscure, constantly changing and unpredictable ways, while the so-called resistance of some may be another kind of unexpected and diffuse domination.¹⁵ To frame everyday talk as a matter of power and victimhood would be to underestimate the complexities of their mutual dependence.

14 See: Ben-Ze’ev, “The vindication of gossip”; Morreall, “Gossip and humor” and Spacks, “In praise of gossip.”

15 Lila Abu-Lughod, “The romance of resistance: Tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women,” *American Ethnologist*, 17, 1, 1990, pp. 41-55.

The City of Harar, Islam and Identity Politics in the Past and Today

The city of Harar has been deeply shaped by its symbolic role as an Islamic centre in the Horn of Africa. Historically, the city has been important for the regional dissemination of Islam and religious education as well as for its urban civilisation and its role as a trade hub between the Red Sea ports and the hinterland of Ethiopia. The enigmatic history of Harar has stirred considerable scholarly attention. Starting with early travel accounts in the nineteenth century,¹⁶ many dimensions of its inhabitants' lives such as social organisation, history, architecture, Islamic manuscripts, and religious practices have been thoroughly investigated.¹⁷ Muslim saints, their legends and practices of saint veneration, like chanting *zikri* (har. religious praise songs), beating drums, reciting Islamic texts and dancing, often accompanied by chewing *čāt*, are a distinctive feature of Harar's religious life that has been studied extensively.¹⁸ The establishment of its

- 16 See: Richard F. Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa, or, An Exploration of Harar* (New York: Dover, 1987 [1894]); Philipp V. Paulitschke, *Harar: Forschungsreise nach den Somäl und Gallaländern, Ost-Afrikas* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1888); and Luigi Robecchi Bricchetti, *Nell' Harrar* (Milano: Casa Editr. Galli, 1896).
- 17 See: Patrick Desplat, *Heilige Stadt - Stadt der Heiligen: Kontroversen und Ambivalenzen islamischer Heiligkeit in Harar, Äthiopien* (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe, 2010); Camilla C.T. Gibb, "Baraka without borders: Integrating communities in the City of Saints," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 1, 1999, pp. 88-108; Philippe Revault and Serge Santelli (eds.), *Harar: A Muslim City of Ethiopia* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2004); Wagner, Ewald. "The genealogy of the Later Walashma' Sultans of Adal and Harar," in Bahru Zewde, Richard Pankhurst and Taddese Beyene (eds.), *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies: Addis Ababa, April 1-6, 1991*, vol. 1, 135-146 (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, 1994) and Sidney R. Waldron, "Social Organisation and Social Control in the Walled City of Harar" (PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 1975).
- 18 See: Zekaria, Ahmed, "Some remarks on the Shrines of Harar," in Bertrand Hirsch and Manfred Kropp (eds.), *Saints, Biographies and History in Africa*, 19-29 (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2003); Ammi, Nadia, "Awach, the Founding Fathers of Harar," in Philippe Revault and Serge Santelli (eds.), *Harar: A Muslim City of Ethiopia*, 73-85 (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2004); Patrick Desplat, *Heilige Stadt - Stadt der Heiligen*; Emile Foucher, "The cult of Muslims saints in Harar: Religious dimensions," in Bahru Zewde, Richard Pankhurst and Taddese Beyene (eds.), *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies: Addis Ababa, April 1-6, 1991*, vol. 1, 71-83 (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, 1994); and Simone Tarsitani, "Zikri rituals in Harar: A musical analysis," in Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg July 20-25, 2003*, 478-484 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006).

religious tradition goes back to the foundation of the city which is described in the *Fath Madīnat Harar*,¹⁹ a local document written in Arabic. The account describes the arrival of Harar's patron saint, Shaykh Abādir 'Umar ar-Riḍā, from the Arabian Peninsula in 1215 with 405 other *shuyūkh* to the already Islamised region of Bandar Gaturī (har. "city of Gaturī," today a Harari family name). He united several villages, reorganised economic activities and established Harar as a trade centre. At the same time, he ordered his companions to settle outside the town and to Islamise the region. The narrative outlines the crucial relations between today's heterogeneity of Muslims in Harar and the different socio-economic conditions under which they historically developed. When Shaykh Abādir restructured the city, he ordered the surrounding tribes, i.e. the Somali, Argoba and different Oromo clans²⁰ to bring their agricultural products to the town and trade them with the urban dwellers, the Harari. He therefore established a scheme of commercial activities that determined the Harari as tradesmen, while the rest of the groups, in particular, the Oromo, became peasants. Each group was under the guidance and protection of one of the Muslim saints who is considered to be their spiritual forefather. In Harari they are referred to as *āwāč*, the founding fathers. The body of saints in Islam are believed to counteract the established socio-economic inequalities between various groups and bring them together in mosques and at shrines. Harar became *madīnat al-awliyā'*, the city of saints, due to the presence of hundreds of sacred places in and outside of the city.

This narrative resonates with other historical accounts. The pastoralists and non-Muslim Oromo came to Harar in the sixteenth century, assimilating the remaining Muslim settlements in the region after the devastating fourteen year *jihād* against the Christian Empire in the central Highlands.²¹

19 Ewald Wagner, *Legende und Geschichte: Der Fath Madinat Harar von Yahya Nasrallah* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1978).

20 This is an obvious invention of a tradition. While Ewald Wagner verified that the time of Shaykh Abādir is historically more or less correct, the Oromo did not arrive in Harar before the sixteenth century – at least not as permanent settlers.

21 See: Joseph Cuoq, *L'Islam en Éthiopie des origines au 16e siècle* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1981) and J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Frank Cass, 1965 [1952]).

They defeated what remained of the Muslim army under Nūr b. Mudjahid (r. 1551-1567 CE), today one of the most venerated saints in Harar, who erected a stone wall (har. *jugäl*) around the city to protect its inhabitants from the attacking Oromo. The wall, however, could not stop the city's downfall, since the Oromo destroyed the surrounding areas causing famine, followed by plagues. Harar became an independent Emirate ruled as a city state until its incorporation into the modern Ethiopian state in 1887. The enclosed Harari successfully defended the city against the attacking Oromo, and Harar gradually returned to its former strength, partly based on subsequent alliances with the Oromo, their gradual settlement and Islamisation.²² As described in the *Faḥ Madīnat Harar*, both groups were symbiotically related economically: while the Oromo were responsible for agriculture, the Harari traded their products. However, this relationship was based on unequal terms since the Harari owned the land that was worked by the Oromo. While some Harari became incredibly rich, most Oromo remained economically dependent on the Harari as tenants until the radical land reform in 1975. Under the socialist Derg regime, rural and urban land was collectivised, while small amounts of land were given to farmers (in this case the Oromo), undermining the former feudal basis of Oromo serfdom.

At this point, Camilla Gibb made a widely-known effort to explain that Islam in Harar is highly inclusive, a "local Islamic orthodoxy" that is "flexible, absorbent and heterogeneous and provides a framework through which the threat of difference and annihilation of the [Harari] group is transformed and often overturned."²³ Shrines of Muslim saints accommodate people from different ethnic groups, classes and even Christians on an egalitarian basis and are central to local religious life. While mosques and prayer are important for Muslim identity in general, visits to shrines are of fundamental significance to the identity of being Muslim in Harar.²⁴ The permeability of

22 See: Ulrich Braukämper, *Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia: Collected Essays*, 2nd edition, (Münster: LIT, 2004) and Sidney R. Waldron, "The political economy of Harari-Oromo relationships, 1559-1874," *Northeast African Studies*, 6, 1/2, 1984, pp. 23-39.

23 Gibb, "Baraka without borders," p. 90.

24 *Ibid*, p. 100.

boundaries in urban Harar goes beyond the religious sphere. Gibb showed that the Harari preserved their status and prestige among their neighbours through the assimilation of others. Gibb's view contrasts with Sidney Waldron, who argues that the prestige of being Harari is maintained through mechanisms of exclusion (strict endogamy, an exclusive social organisation and the control of the flow of communication through language).²⁵ A central concept of Harari domination is *gēlāmad*, "learning the city," which describes a process of appropriating rather primordial categories such as language, culture, residence and religion. Gibb makes an important point on the role of Muslim saints for the urban and the surrounding rural population. Still, when I conducted fieldwork a decade later, I was quite surprised to find that the shrines were mostly visited (*ziyāra*) by small groups of Oromo, many from the countryside, while the urban Harari did not participate in the religious ceremonies. Although most of my informants would not have doubted the role of Muslim saints for the city as described by Gibb, they nevertheless claimed that the usual practices at shrines on Thursday nights are not compatible with their work schedules on Friday mornings. As will be explained later, there are some deeper meanings relating to keeping away from shrine practices. While most Harari almost never go to shrines, the meaning of identity boundaries has changed dramatically since the research of Camilla Gibb during the early nineteen-nineties. While the concept of *gēlāmad*, "learning the city," is well known, its usually positive connotation changed to something perceived as undesirable and even destructive. Why should an Amhara or Oromo abandon his "original" identity and become a Harari? This has been a common question among the latter when confronted with this term. This change was rooted in the politics of an institutionalised ethno-nationalism since the nineteen-nineties.

While religious freedom has been stipulated in the constitution, the new Ethiopian government initiated a policy of ethnic federalism and political decentralisation. The system was intended to guarantee the right of self-administration to ethnic-linguistic groups (Amhara, Somali, Oromo, Afar, Tigre, Harari) that were defined as nations (amhar.

25 Waldron, "Social Organisation and Social Control."

beherasab). This empowerment by the state has led to increasing fields of tension between ethno-linguistic groups and triggered current identity politics. Today's struggles for recognition, participation in power and authenticity resulted in a previously unknown cultural essentialism and ethno-nationalism that influenced Ethiopian Muslims' orientation. Membership in reform movements and belonging to a certain ethnic group became part of a process of identification in which the religious and ethnic aspects had a reciprocal and reinforcing effect, while enhancing an antagonism between different reform groups. In this process, Gurage are often equated with Tabligh Jama'at, the Oromo with Salafism, while the 'intellectualist' movement, influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, is perceived as being in league with the Amhara.²⁶ At a time when post-socialist longing for religion as well as political empowerment and essentialism of identity were triggered simultaneously, the new pattern of equating ethnic identities with religious affiliations might be a unique but rather unstable reflection of certain trends. Today, these boundaries are rather fluid and not very closely attached to ethnic identities. However, Oromo are still often – as in Harar – associated with a Salafi-inspired Islam.

For the Harari, the state policy of ethnic self-administration has been surprisingly successful and they have been guaranteed the right to rule as a minority over their own regional state, the HPNRS. It is the smallest regional state in Ethiopia, surrounded by the biggest, the Oromia Regional State, which during the initial negotiations at the beginning of the nineteen-nineties, claimed Harar to be part of their administrative unit. In this situation, and despite overseeing the regional state, the Harari seemed to be confronted by a double threat. On the one hand, Salafi-inspired Oromo who question the role of Muslim saints and criticise practices of saint veneration as being illegitimate Islamic innovations (arab. *bida'*). On the other hand, there is a new political elite of Oromo, which wants to assimilate Harar and the Harari. The feeling of being threatened has been cultivated by the Harari for centuries and is part of their political-

26 Terje Østebø, "The question of becoming: Islamic reform movements in contemporary Ethiopia," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 38, 2008, pp. 416-446.

cultural history as a minority.²⁷ It is against this background that current everyday talk about religious ethics and practices has been embedded. When and where people debate is related to a specific everyday rhythm of strolling around in the morning and chewing *çät* in the afternoon.

Making *shirshir*, having *bärça*: Spatial, Temporal and Material Contours of Everyday Talk

Making *shirshir* and having *bärça* are probably the most common everyday social activities in Harar. Although they represent different social spaces, they are both crucial for the flow of information, gathering news, exchanging gossip and are therefore essential in claiming, maintaining and transforming boundaries of difference. They are conventional, highly routinized as far as gender-specific practices are concerned, framed by time and space, and performed by all classes, ethnic and religious groups. *Shirshir* means simply strolling around, mostly in the morning. After the women have cleaned up their respective houses and run errands at the local markets, they often visit each other's houses. Men, on the other hand, leave the house early for work and, on their way or during break time; they will visit small shops or coffee houses along the main road to become informed about recent news, gossip and rumours. The coffee houses are the most important meeting places, where one often sits outside on the terrace to watch the passers-by, to drink macchiato and to chat with friends or sit with neighbours.

It should be underlined that work and morning breaks are two of the rare occasions when individuals interact loosely with people of different ethnic or religious backgrounds. Although one could observe a tendency for friendship that goes hand-in-hand with ethnic affiliation, for example a Harari will often sit with his Harari friends, Amhara with their Amhara companions, etc. people are more mixed than in other everyday situations. But even if sitting apart, they are within eye and ear shot of each other and

27 Patrick Desplat, "Against Wahhabism? Islamic reform, ambivalence and sentiments of loss in Harar," in Patrick Desplat and Terje Østebø (eds.), *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism*, 163-184 (New York: Palgrave, 2013).

carefully lower their voices if discussing something important. However, talk and gossip in the morning are characterised more by harmless talk and rarely by slander. For example, topics such as the rise and fall of petrol prices, the upcoming finale of the football Champions League, the problem of Palestine's occupation and the political role of the US might be discussed with great enthusiasm. Making *shirshir* and picking up recent news is part of an on stage discourse where Harari typically avoid sensitive topics and open confrontations about 'important' things, such as local and national politics, religion or ethnic identities. The *shirshir* usually ends between 11am and 1pm with the purchase of *çāt*. The time between *shirshir* and lunch is called *harara*, "cooking over." It is a time when the demand for new *çāt* and the anticipation of its consumption in the afternoon results in an increased level of activity with unusually loud debates between men about banalities, and at the worst, fist fights and car accidents. The situation calms down when men walk home with their purchased *çāt* and the city starts to become deserted until the early evening.

While the streets are empty, houses are usually full with people, engaging in *bārça*, the afternoon *çāt* session. Men meet at least once a week with a *djamā'a*, "group," mostly their friendship group (har. *muḡād*). The members, usually four to six male friends (har. *mārīnaç*) are often childhood friends, which creates an intimate social space of trust and confidence where people debate, fight, then reconcile while sharing the latest gossip and sensitive issues. While some groups meet with a specific intention, like peer-learning or the fight against HIV, most people prefer to enjoy the daily leisure routine, meeting without specific goals while talking, smoking and watching TV. When compared with the morning stroll, *bārça* happens in a rather secluded, offstage environment.

In general, older men, women and children refrain from chewing *çāt*. In Ethiopia, consuming *çāt* has been associated with being Muslim, while drinking coffee was characterised as Christian. In Harar, these boundaries blurred. While many Muslim Harari enjoy the Ethiopian coffee ceremony, Christian Amhara appropriated the *bārça* of their Muslim counterparts. Formerly, *çāt* was chewed in larger quantities along

with religious ceremonies at shrines or while reciting religious texts during the night, particularly during the fasting month of Ramadhan, with the purpose of keeping the faithful awake and concentrated. Most religious-cultural events as well as marriage or funeral ceremonies are unimaginable without *çāt*. However, these situations are more open and inclusive but at the same time restrictive through their social hierarchies and symbolic constraints. During my fieldwork, I rarely observed inter-ethnic *bārça* groups. These mostly comprised either young students or people who did not care about recent identity politics, which means they were likely marginalised within their respective communities. However, as it is presented here, talking and gossiping is a specific practice of the Harari, and not so much the chewing of *çāt* itself. Other ethnic groups perceive Harari men to be extremely chatty, not in a social manner but in a backbiting way.²⁸

Usually, Harari meet in domestic houses for their everyday *bārça*. These houses are built in the historical style of the *gē gār*, the traditional Harari house. The house often has only one big room which is used for living, sleeping, eating and leisure time, while sometimes a granary on the second floor is rebuilt into a separate sleeping room. The central room (*har. gidār gār*) has five different platforms (*har. nādāba*) of different sizes and height, covered with carpets and cushions to make them as comfortable as possible. In every Harari house, the platforms are painted red, symbolising the bloodshed and the deaths of many young Harari men during the defence of Harar in the war against Menelik II. Although the *bārça* comprises egalitarian friends, members in a house are seated according to their social role and status within their friendship group: while the upper levels are usually occupied by the host, older ones, the most knowledgeable or the head of the household, the lower platforms are used by lower ranks or those who pass by. The walls have eleven niches (*har. tāqēt*) that display porcelain, glass or Islamic votives. Depending on the economic background of the family, they are also covered with

28 Somalis sometimes call the Harari *khu-khu* as derived from the common Harari greeting *amanta khu*. The pejorative naming implies that Harari men are just as talkative as women.

dozens of old Chinese enamel bowls, handmade Harari baskets and wooden bowls. During the daytime, the open wooden doors (har. *gār bāri*) are the only source of light entering the dim house, which makes it easier for its inhabitants to identify approaching guests.

These domestic spaces are the perfect place for an afternoon spent gossiping. Although the compound which leads to the house, as well as the house itself, is open during the day, the rooms used for *bārča* are more secluded than the rather open atmosphere during the coffee house visits in the morning. Depending on the size of the house and the occasion, up to thirty people may sit together to consume *čāt*. However, the common friendship groups for *bārča* – as mentioned above – are rather small with up to six people, usually of the same age, gender and class. Before starting the *bārča*, the house must be prepared. As a rule, this is done by the wife of the head of the household, but if he is not married, then he will do it himself. Carpets and cushions are cleaned and set in a specific order. Glasses for tea or coffee will be prepared as well as the coal for incense that burns most of the time. Small plastic mats will be distributed to prevent the carpets from getting dirty from the *čāt* and the remains of the plant (har. *garāba*), but also to prevent the *čāt* from becoming dirty, since it is traditionally the plant of the pious; a sacred vehicle with which the consumer may make supplications to God.

The *bārča* itself follows the rhythm of the drug effect. When people arrive, they make themselves comfortable and start to chew *čāt*. The atmosphere is energetic, humorous and many jokes are made. But after swallowing the first balls of chewed leaves and rinsing the mouth with water (har. *lulluqäčča*, or short *lullu*), the atmosphere becomes more serious and concentrated. At first, people may talk at the same time, but the modes of communication change when the drug takes effect. Usually, one person explains things, while the others follow, rarely interrupting the speaker. Fights between friends are rare, since everybody likes to enjoy the effect of the *čāt* and negative emotions and aggression would break the ambience. This slowly-achieved state of consciousness is known as *märkana*, and brings – at the beginning – a concentrated focus into the talk. This is the time when people gossip about ‘serious’ news

and topics. After two or three hours, the atmosphere abruptly turns from lively discussions into elegiac silence. While continuing chewing *čāt*, most of the people will start to write something, watch television, or – more recently – play with their *fārändji tasbih* (har. lit. “the rosary of the Europeans”), the mobile phone. During sunset and the *maghrib*-prayer, most of the people will leave the intimate circle and go to the mosque and/or their homes.

At first sight, *shirshir* and *bārča* appear to be different, in terms of both the content and intensity of debating; *shirshir* is more open/ public while *bārča* is more closed/ private. However, this division is not fully accurate. While various sensitive topics are addressed during *bārča* in ways in which they are not debated in public, they are nevertheless part of the common knowledge. Sidney Waldron²⁹ was the first – and so far, the last – scholar who focussed on gossiping in Harar. He argues that each friendship group is linked first with the individuals’ households (har. *aḥli*) and second with the neighbourhood organisations (har. *afōča*). Every Harari is supposed to be a member of these social institutions. Gossip with friends automatically flows through these bilateral relations and therefore news spreads with lightning speed, making any secret public within a few hours or even less.³⁰ In this sense, the rather private setting of a *bārča* constitutes its own public. To divide *shirshir* or any performance

29 Waldron, “Social Organisation and Social Control.”

30 However, the *bārča*, as described, is a rather recent phenomenon. As in many other societies where *čāt* became part of everyday life, the *bārča* is often criticised by the abstinent elders, who argue that the *čāt* consumption today reaches an “excessive” state and that it became a “bad habit” mostly associated with laziness; in particular, the daily use of *čāt* at the secluded afternoon leisure time. According to oral histories, most inhabitants of Harar were peasants who worked their land during the day. The stimulating plant was consumed in the morning before they engaged in the hard-agricultural work and during break time, but never for several hours continuously. This pattern of daily consumption changed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many Harari abandoned peasantry (and handicrafts) and became occupied with retail trade. New shops were opened by Yemeni merchants who migrated first to Dire Dawa then to Harar. The owners introduced the practice of chewing *čāt* in the afternoon which became fast appropriated by the Harari. In the wake of increasing migration abroad, only a minority of the Harari stayed in Harar, and remittances became an important element in upholding the practice of afternoon chewing.

in public as being on stage and the *bārça* as being exclusively offstage would be inaccurate, since both social spaces are linked through different channels of communication.

Hidden Sufis, hidden Wahhabis: *Bārça* Boundary Talk among the Harari

Boundary talk about others happens mostly during the afternoon *bārça*, usually between the start of the *bārça* and the time at which the effect of the *çāt* becomes too strong for the users to engage in emotional and vivid discussions. In this rather small time span, sensitive matters such as religion or ethnicity are often discussed, usually in the form of gossip, rumours, chit-chat or artful narratives, depending on the participants and the news that is shared. The following descriptions of boundary talk are never as homogenous and neatly structured as presented here. Usually, themes and topics blur into each other and it is rather common to change from sports to terrorism, water problems, Sufism and back to football again. A long discussion concerning only religion is rare and, if it occurs, it is related to a specific event or social group. For example, the nostalgia for a lost past has often been triggered by a debate about the enlistment of Harar as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage, while slandering someone as a ‘good-deed-sayer’ is often related to simple observations during the morning, for instance, when seeing someone wearing expensive sneakers under an Islamic dress.

During *bārça*, people play with stereotypes, be they religion, ethnicity or class. They gossip or slander but they similarly invent artful narratives full of (self-)irony. One of the most inspiring stories I heard during an afternoon chewing session had been presented by Abdul Karim, an economist of about sixty years of age, whose hobby was the composition of short stories and poems in the Harari language. During this session, he was the respected elder of the group and he immediately took over the role of the main speaker, making jokes and posing interesting, thought-provoking questions. It was still the beginning of a *bārça* and everybody was joyful. Abdul Karim was a good narrator, and while telling us one of his recent short stories; he used his arms, raised and lowered his voice,

making the audience laugh, while he explained the role of the Harari people in relation to their neighbours:

When the French decided to build a railway connecting Djibouti and Addis Ababa via Dire Dawa, they planned to discuss their decision with those groups whose land should be crossed by the train. Naturally they started with the Amhara, since they ruled the country. They went to the Emperor and asked him if they should start with the construction and he answered: 'What? You want to build something like a car that smokes? No! This is the work of Satan!' Then the French went to the Oromo and asked them the same question. The Oromo shrugged with their shoulders and pointed towards their donkey. They explained: 'We don't need your train. We have donkeys, we like it the traditional way.' Then the French approached the Somalis. But the Somalis were more surprised and puzzled. They couldn't decide and answered: 'Well, we don't know. Let's ask the Harari since they know a lot of things.' Finally, the Somalis went to the Harari and reported the demands of the French. The Harari finally decided: 'Don't let them build the train. They simply want to convert you!'

This is a story, full of wit and self-irony, a caricature of stereotypes from the perspective of the Harari: the ruling Christian Amhara as being afraid of innovations, the Oromo as traditional peasants without knowledge and interest in technological development, the uneducated and uncertain Somalis and the Harari as knowledgeable authorities and guardians of Islam, being paranoid about possible conversion to another religion. The topic is somehow sensitive and would not be narrated during the morning stroll. It simplified how the Harari see themselves and others, without slandering. The story mirrors the analysis of Waldron³¹ who argued that the Harari could control religion through the monopolisation of their language. In traditional Islamic education in Harar, an original text would be read loud in Arabic, with comments and discussions in Harari which was not accessible to other groups. At the same time, the Harari seemed to know a minimum of four to five other languages, thus controlling the flow of information in the city. In the

31 Waldron, "Social Organisation and Social Control" and Waldron, "The political economy of Harari-Oromo relationships."

story narrated during *bārça*, the Harari know more than all the others. Their narrations are often vague about what exactly they know. Many of my informants had basic knowledge but not necessarily the knowledge of educated religious scholars. However, their perceptions of knowing more than the others in religious ways seemed to play an important role in making them feel superior. This relates to boundary work against those who practice saint veneration as well to as Muslim activists, the so-called ‘Wahhabis.’ At the same time, people would never consider themselves ‘good Muslims.’ Instead, they would always lament about the decline of religiosity and religious practices. That does not restrict many of them from discussing other Muslims’ attitudes, practices and their reputation as being ignorant and “wannabe” scholars, sometimes liars and hypocrites, and, in rare cases, even as being non-Muslims.

Nostalgia in Harar is often present during *bārça* and most men enjoy the bittersweet qualities of a past long gone. They may in general regret that people deviated from Allah’s way while denouncing local Muslims, including themselves, for their lack of respect for local Muslim saints. The life of the saints and their deeds represent a past of Harar, which has been, contrary to the present, represented as an era of social justice in politics, economics and religion: an equilibrium which is attributed to the specific location of the city. The era of the saints is often compared to the times of the *saḥāba*, the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, during the early days of the foundation of Islam. It is a time when all Harari were believed to be Sufis, living a humble life while having a mystical orientation towards the world. Ibrahim, a young Harari graduate from Addis Ababa working for an NGO, once claimed that “it was Islamic mysticism which shaped the life of the Harari and that everything fit together like a spider-web. Harar has been beyond an average Islam, but today they [the Harari] are just average.”³² The religious aspect plays an important role in nostalgic remembrances of a better time. However, religion is one part of a wider self-perception of an ideal community of the past, which was dominated by religion, as well as social coherence, agriculture and political independence.

32 Informant, Interview: 6 August 2003.

People in Harar perceive Sufism as an ideal form of Islam. Religious practices have often been associated with the Qādiriyya³³ and there are several shrines dedicated to its founder: 'Abdulqādir Djlānī, while many guardians of these shrines claim to be affiliated to the Sufi order. However, nobody would seriously declare in public to be a Sufi. That would draw harsh criticism and accusations from the community of being a liar since Sufism in Harar is mostly associated with an ascetic and idealistic lifestyle, detached from this world; a lifestyle that is deemed to be impossible for ordinary people. Yet, that does not mean that Sufis are not present. Most Harari would argue that they do exist in contemporary Harar, but they are hiding (har. *khudūn*). For example, during *bārça* many people may discuss which person *could be* a Sufi. Often, they may identify a beggar or mentally ill person living on the street and dependent on alms and the remains of *çāt* (har. *garāba*) collected in better-off households. Their incomprehensible communications are perceived as possibly coded behaviour. They are, as Sufism in general, part of the mediation of the invisible. Practices of burning incense or the divination through a ritual feeding of hyenas³⁴ might not be Islamic in a strict sense, but some Harari argue that they help people to worship God, which is what finally counts. Many shrine guardians in Harar as well as some religious scholars have explained that Sufism is a world view that divides the visible and the invisible, two interconnected worlds. In this sense the Harari term *khudūn* is the equivalent of the Arabic *al-bāṭin*, the mysterious and hidden reality that reflects the profane and elusive world, *aḏ-zāhir*.³⁵ The importance of the unseen goes back to the hagiography of an eighteenth century saint. According to oral histories, Shaykh Hāshim b. 'Abdul'aziz was underestimated throughout his whole life as being lazy, confused and abnormal in his behaviour. He often withdrew to his house for prayers, and was accused by the community of Harar of evoking evil

33 Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*.

34 Ahmed Zekaria, "Hyena porridge: Ethnographic filming in the City of Harar," *Sociology Ethnology Bulletin of Addis Ababa University*, 1, 1992, pp. 83-93.

35 Edward B. Reeves, *The Hidden Government: Ritual, Clientelism and Legitimation in Northern Egypt* (Utah: University of Utah Press, 1990).

spirits. Confronted with these accusations, he left Harar and announced that after him all saints should be hidden (har. *khudūn*).

Another point often mentioned during *bārĉa* had been the denial of any relationship between Sufism, in its idealistic form, and practices at shrines. Although people may praise the local saints and underline their historical role for the community, thus emphasising their importance for maintaining identity, most of my informants, who were educated, well-to-do, male Harari, rarely or never visited shrines or otherwise participated in their activities. They may even disparage certain religious practices as wrong, explicitly express doubts about certain practices and criticise the people involved, categorising them as ‘women’ or ‘peasants.’ Most of the participants at shrines are in fact women and many of them are Oromo from the surrounding region, but the point is that these terms imply the lack of religious knowledge, devaluing the participants as ‘ignorant’ and ‘illiterate.’ In general, most Harari would look down on people who participate in the veneration of shrines, because they are perceived to do things, such as begging for a personal favour from a Muslim saint or dancing during the ceremonies, without knowing why they are doing them.

A quite different but much more emotional discourse on others is related to current Muslim activists. Targets of this talk are the so-called ‘Wahhabis.’ This term is used in Harar as well by the Ethiopian public³⁶ and is a pejorative term that labels Salafi-inspired movements who themselves reject this expression.³⁷ The initial arrival of Salafi-inspired ideas has been linked to the Italian occupation (1936–1941) when Ethiopian pilgrims returned and started to teach in a local school of Harar where these ideas spread to south-eastern regions. The incidence of Salafism in

36 See for example the articles: Alem Zelalem, “Saudi Arabia’s Wahabism and the threat to Ethiopia’s national security,” September 26, 2003. Retrieved May 27, 2016, from http://www.ethiomediamedia.com/press/wahabism_threat_to_ethiopia.html and “Simmering Religious In-Roads of Imported Wahhabism in Ethiopia”. Retrieved May 27, 2016, from <http://nazret.com/blog/index.php/2011/09/05/wikileaks-simmering-religious-in-roads-of-imported-wahhabism-in-ethiopia>.

37 People in Harar also like to discuss attitudes of other groups such as the Tablighī Djama’at or, the already-mentioned, al-Ahbāsh. However, for the purpose of this article’s discussion, I will exclude these debates.

Harar was a short-lived episode that has been described elsewhere.³⁸ As a movement, Salafism lasted much longer in the region of Bale, mostly inhabited by Oromo, and in the capital of Addis Ababa, while spreading towards other regions, such as Wollo or Jimma; this spread was largely attributable to educational scholarships that Muslim Ethiopian students received from Saudi universities.³⁹

If people participating in *bārça* discuss and talk about this Muslim movement then this will either provoke complete silence, since nobody would like to be engaged in a rather sensitive discussion with the possibility of spoiling the ambience, or it will trigger, which is more likely, a hot debate with sometimes even aggressive and outrageous accusations and finger pointing. Some of the Harari were straightforward with their opinion and called the Wahhabis ‘parrot-like cassettes,’ ‘extremists,’ or just ‘good-deed-sayers’ (har. *khayri baiash*). In general, most people would consider them as being ignorant, inexperienced and simply repeating arguments of their Shaykhs without being able to reason independently. Most Harari consider them too extreme (amhar. *akrari*), fanatical and zealous in their approach to other Muslims. Others would have suspected them of being vassals of Saudi Arabia and, implicitly, gaining financially from this connection.

Who the ‘Wahhabis’ are, where to find them, what they argue or what exactly provoked this argument against them, have all remained vague, ambiguous and indistinct. Some argued that they are in the countryside, others said they are in the city but hiding themselves. Some claimed that religious scholars asked them to come forward and to debate their religious background. In general, there has been an extremely hazy discourse with absent and untraceable victims. However, it was unmistakable that the ‘Wahhabis’ were considered a threat and that they are associated with the Oromo, mainly from the countryside. One story in particular has been told

38 See: Haggai Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity, and Politics Entwined* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007) and Desplat, “Against Wahhabism?”

39 Abbas Haji Gnamo, “Islam, the Orthodox Church and Oromo Nationalism (Ethiopia),” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines*, 165, 2002, pp. 99-120 and Terje Østebø, *Localising Salafism: Religious Change among Oromo Muslims in Bale, Ethiopia*, vol. 12 of *Islam in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

during different *bārças*, describing a scene where Muslims peacefully sat at a shrine in the countryside, when ‘Wahhabis’ came by and harassed them. In this narrative, the ‘Wahhabis’ did not harm the shrine supporters, but destroyed their censer made of clay (har. *girgira*), which is used for burning incense and an important item in saint veneration practices.

This story is extremely vague and is in fact the only story about a direct confrontation yet told. Nevertheless, it sheds light on a specific viewpoint of urban Harari on the rural areas. Unlike the city, which they *de facto* control, the rural areas are inhabited by Oromo and therefore outside the town’s jurisdiction and control. The countryside is a synonym for a potential threat, a grey area, where those who are regarded as being Wahhabi could spread their religious influence unhindered among the uneducated peasants. This perspective is influenced by historical experiences. Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century, Harar was a city-state, a small Muslim enclave in a region that was unstable and raided by (at that time) non-Muslim pastoral Oromo. Gradually, the Oromo settled around Harar, bonded with the Harari through alliances and became Muslims. This group, today framed as the ‘traditional peasants,’ are regarded as friendly by the Harari as they engage in shrine practices. New political agents of the Oromo, whether they are Muslim activists or politicians advocating Oromo nationalism, are considered a threat towards the Harari. Thus, they are usually disparaged during *bārča*. This perspective is strengthened by Ibrahim:

The Oromo-Wahhabis are against cultural things. They reject the recitation of the *mawlid* during the wedding ceremony. If an Oromo has a good relationship with the Harari, he appropriates our practice and leads the *mawlid* readings during his wedding. But the Wahhabis force them to stop the recitation. They are also against the blessed food served. In the countryside, they campaign against the shrines. They explain to the people, ‘this is Harari and not Oromo. This is not Islam but Harari culture.’ They even warned us not to continue our practice.

This explanation summarises important points in this process of labelling and the fact that religious affiliations and ethnic identities are discursively intermingled. The statement reveals that the Harari fear that they might be destroyed by the ‘Wahhabis.’ This makes it clear that aspects of identity as well as culture are seen as endangered and should therefore be defended. In this case, one’s own culture is internally as well as externally strengthened, while the rhetoric of threat is the initial point for the construction of an essentialised imagination of the self, the Harari – and the exclusion of others.⁴⁰

To prove that their accusations are right, people in Harar often referred to a polemical text, found in many Harari households that strengthens and seems to legitimise their argument against the ‘Wahhabis.’ In the text, *Memoirs of Mr. Hempher, the British Spy of the Middle East*,⁴¹ the protagonist Hempher describes his life as a spy who was supposed to divide the global Muslim community in the eighteenth century. Disguised as an Arab, he made friends with Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb whom he incited to perform un-Islamic practices. Together they developed a new religious programme of Wahhabism, including the destruction of shrines dedicated to Muslim saints. Together they met a leader of the Saud clan and, as history shows, caused the politico-religious conquest of Saudi-Arabia.

Everyday Talk, Social Consequences and Tactics of Avoidance

Everyday talk encompasses a wide range of gossiping, chit-chat, rumours and conspiracy theories which transcend religious, political and economic spheres. The discourse against Wahhabism or any form of assumed ‘religious extremism’ is an emotional, sensitive, but nevertheless ambiguous discourse. What does this everyday talk during the afternoon *bārça* do apart from articulate symbolic boundaries? If people are accused of having lost their way from a religious perspective, then this is not only about the theological problem but also about how one performs in public. Although people in Harar may be curious, suspicious and ask questions

40 Desplat, “Against Wahhabism?”

41 A version of the text under the title *Confessions of a British Spy and British Enmity against Islam* can be found here: <http://www.sunna.info/antiwahabies/wahhabies/htm/spy1.htm>.

if a woman suddenly starts to wear a black *niqāb* instead of the common colored headscarf, a choice that for many Harari is a sign of belonging to the Salafi affiliation, there would be no social consequences. If this woman exposes herself through preaching and giving religious lectures which could indicate that she follows Salafism, then she might be expelled from the community or institution or sanctioned in one way or another. It is not the display of piety – people are rather free to use them or not in public – but the public commitment to a specific denomination that generates a sometimes-fierce reaction. One example in Harar has been a rather short episode of a group affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. In the middle of the nineteen-nineties, a group of six Egyptians, men and women, reached Harar via Yemen. According to some informants, elders had been suspicious about them but the group became employed by a local Harari school where the Egyptians taught Arabic and Islam. Although they were able to inspire the Harari youth, tensions arose after about six months and they had to leave the country. The circumstances are ambiguous, but one of the main critical points was that the group started to give sermons by using the loudspeakers of a mosque. It soon became known that they were members of the Muslim Brotherhood. This kind of religious engagement went too far for some influential Harari and they reported the group to the Ethiopian authorities, who banned them for possessing false papers. It is unclear whether the group was finally rejected because they were preaching religious issues that did not conform to the interpretation of Islam by the Harari, or because they violated Harari norms through preaching loudly in public.

Most narratives about events including Muslim activism which violates the limits set by the Harari are vague and ambiguous. The problem with the ‘Wahhabis’ is different, because unlike the episodes of the Egyptians or the destruction of a clay censer in a shrine in the countryside, this conflict with ‘Wahhabis’ entails no direct social consequences because there is practically no social contact or interaction between the so-called them and the Harari. This applies to everyday life, as well as to the religious life in mosques, shrines or religious schools. Unless Oromo ‘Wahhabi’ activists come forward and preach in front of an (urban) public, there

are no effective sanctions. This is largely because the existing identity politics have already drawn a clear boundary between Oromo and Harari, and that boundary is negotiated at a political level. The religious sphere adds to the existing boundary, but it also mirrors the existing division between Oromo and Harari.

Therefore, I would suggest another perspective. Although the everyday talk is clearly directed towards those who are considered to be different and that this difference is strengthened, it is also directed towards the Harari themselves. Everyday talk claims, maintains and produces boundaries, but at the same time tries to cement social cohesion. Rather than trying to determine how everyday talk impacts on those who are its victims, it is more stimulating to ask what it does to those who are involved in the process of labelling.

Any gossip and chit-chat is not only about communicating information; it also reflects concerns. It is less concerned about an individual's failure and instead focuses more on the condition of the community or the city of Harar, for which the Harari feel responsible. Nobody would like to be the victim of gossip and most Harari are afraid of losing their reputation because of backbiting. Those Harari with a bad reputation for not respecting the norms and values of the Harari community will easily be the prey of the afternoon slander during *bārča*. Since the community of Harari is relatively small, with fifteen thousand members, most of whom live in the old town and are linked through the social organisations of friendship, neighbourhood groups and family networks, each Harari could at least position and identify another one. There are practically no strangers and it is unlikely that any public act will remain a secret. A Harari, therefore, will be extremely careful about how he behaves in public and deals with other people of the city. If he starts to quarrel with another Harari or otherwise breaches ethics and norms, he will become the subject of gossip which would eventually reach everyone of concern to him, including those who have the power to sanction his or her behaviour; typically, the father of the family.⁴²

42 Sidney Waldron, "Within the Wall and Beyond: Harari Ethnic Identity and its Future," A paper presented at the Conference on Harari Studies organised by the Historical Society of Ethiopia, June 1975.

The social consequences of misbehaving are more severe in the case of religion. Conversion to Christianity results in immediate expulsion from the community. During my fieldwork, I found very few Harari who converted, but people talked about them as if they were already dead. To expose oneself as being a ‘Wahhabi’ has less severe consequences but will nevertheless definitely lead to exclusion from social institutions. During one chewing session, Muhammad, a young graduate from the University of Addis Ababa explained to me:

The Wahhabis are currently powerless and don’t have many followers. They are not successful since we, the Harari, hate those people. We don’t have any social contact with them and if someone admits to be a Wahhabi, we break off the relation ... To be a Wahhabi means social stigma. If you are a Wahhabi, you are not allowed to be part of an *afḍəḥa* [har. important neighbourhood organisation]. The Wahhabis have to hide their attitude. However, the Wahhabis don’t want to have anything to do with us. If we invite them to discuss our differences, they don’t come, because they know nothing and are afraid.

Being stigmatised as a Wahhabi is something every Harari would like to avoid: to be thrown out of an *afḍəḥa* would not only be shameful for the individual and his family but it could also mean that he or she is no longer a true Harari since membership for a Harari is obligatory.⁴³

A common way to avoid becoming a victim of gossip is to downplay one’s own doings, wealth or religious opinions. It is difficult for an outsider to differentiate Harari based on their status and wealth since they never display differences in public. These differences obviously exist but they are softened because people are reluctant to display them. Harari regard poverty as shameful, and families might keep a very poor person in their compound. In a similar vein, many Harari try to adjust their

43 Waldron, “Social Organisation and Social Control.”

personal religious attitude to the boundaries set by the Harari to avoid dangerous gossip and the possible consequences. Salah, for example, is a Harari graduate from Alamaya University. He started to work in the administration of the Harari Regional state, but was unhappy and bored with his position because it was a desk job without any meaningful work involved. His influential father got him the position, but he had to start at the lowest rank. Although he is Harari, he was born and raised in Dire Dawa, a city about fifty miles from Harar. We became close friends and he often visited my house during lunch break because he wanted to smoke a cigarette, which he did not dare to do in public because he feared getting into trouble if his uncle found out about his secret habit. He lived outside the old town with two of his cousins in two rented rooms. One day, I was invited to Salah's house for *bārça* and all three started to complain that they are treated like outsiders by those Harari who were born in the city. It was hard for them to make friends and, at work, they always had to perform unpopular tasks. To them, Sufism or saint veneration was something they never experienced. Salah immediately started to joke, pointing his finger to one of his cousins, announcing that he is definitely a Wahhabi, while the others answered with a smile. Salah eventually came to the point that they do not support saint veneration, since they do not see the use of praying at a shrine, while one could do so at home. If he made his opinion public, Salah complained, he would be immediately accused of being a Wahhabi. Therefore, it seems a better choice for him to keep this secret to himself, since he does not want to endanger his already low reputation among the Harari. Their reputation is constantly questioned by the Harari, who want evaluate whether those people who are Harari but not born in Harar are truly trustworthy people.

During my fieldwork, there was only one event when a religious scholar preached several times in public during one week; this was in the Friday mosque and in the community hall, as well as in more private circles. The preaching was recorded with digital cameras and later screened during several *bārças*. In 2003, the religious scholar, Shaykh 'Abdallāh al-Harari (1910-2008), gave several sermons concerning his perspective on Islam, which is an uncompromising attitude towards

extremist forms of Islam, while seeing himself as a defender of Sufism and religious moderation. This scholar was born in Harar and in 2003 was the leader of the Lebanese religious organisation al-Ahbāsh, ‘the Ethiopians.’ One could immediately recognise the parallel discourse between the scholar visiting Harar and the everyday talk during *bārça*: praising Sufism, and being against ‘Wahhabis.’ However, that did not mean that the Harari just adopted these ideas. Although Shaykh ‘Abdallāh al-Harari has many sympathisers among the Harari and his sermons again stirred the debates against the ‘Wahhabis,’ this time often in a joking way, many Harari had been very critical towards the approach and accusations of the scholar. Naming people in public as being affiliated with Wahhabism was unacceptable for many Harari, who asked – during *bārça* – for proof supporting these accusations and mentioned that this kind of behaviour was neither modest nor moderate. Many of my informants were at least sure that his performance did not gain him more followers. Apart from the accusation towards individuals, the Shaykh also publicly disagreed on several occasions with what he referred to as “destructive and un-Islamic behaviour that dominates everyday life”: gossiping. However, it seems obvious that very few Harari discussed this point during the next afternoon’s chewing sessions.

Conclusion

This paper examined how Harari, through their everyday talk, seek to construct and maintain boundaries against those whom they consider as being different. My main concern has been to illustrate that religious boundary work is not restricted to institutionalised spaces, such as mosques, shrines, Islamic schools or even religious TV channels. Instead I opted for a perspective of everyday situations and, in particular, the *bārça*, the daily afternoon *çāt* session, to shed light on how Harari position themselves as Muslims towards others. This perspective derives from current research which frames Muslim lives according to the themes of ethical self-improvement, correct religious practice and political Islam; this is because public display of piety, open debates and public sermons are generally condemned in the Harari community. Instead, religious

differences were almost exclusively pronounced in everyday spaces during the intimate and trustful afternoon situations where friends come together for the sake of talking and chewing *çāt*. This perspective addressed being Muslim as a lived experience that permeates and manifests itself in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways. Although gossiping is widely considered by the Harari themselves as an un-Islamic and immoral practice, most of them do this with great enthusiasm. The daily chit-chat, and the ways in which this would crisscross different subjects and spheres, is rarely a prescriptive approach. Although being a 'Wahhabi' might have severe consequences, such as being excluded, other ideas or groups are seen less critically. Boundaries were seldom strict and more permeable than fixed, particularly in the case of the practices of saint veneration.

The example of Harari everyday discourse also shows that people elude all those categorisations that have been popular in social sciences. They are Sunnis following the Shāfi'i school of law, but beyond these labels any terms are inaccurate. The Harari might sympathise with Sufism but they are not Sufis. They do not participate in practices at shrines but they do not condemn these practices either; at least not completely. They are not Muslim reformers or activists with any Salafi or Wahhabi background. They even criticised one of their own people, the famous religious scholar Shaykh 'Abdallāh al-Harari and his attitudes. If they talk about themselves, they rather point to a past long gone, when their forefathers had been 'good Muslims.' Today, they might try their best, but they admit that they could do better and that the designation of Harar as the fourth holiest city in Islam by the UNESCO is something that nobody is proud of.

Following the debates, the gossip and chit-chat during *bārça*, the everyday talk always points towards what they are not. The Harari do not want to label themselves. In their own universe, they are simply Muslims, nothing more and nothing less. Perhaps Samuli Schielke⁴⁴ is right in his provocative critique that there is "too much Islam in the anthropology

44 Schielke, "Second thoughts about the anthropology of Islam," p.11.

of Islam.” I would also agree with his claim that the recent focus on embodied piety, political Islam and secularism is a narrow perspective on Muslim life insofar as this focus represents a minority of Muslims. Like the Harari, many Muslims are not occupied full-time with prayer, Islamic education and religious media because they have a life beyond that, a life that often is difficult and uncertain. Discussing news and chewing *çāt* with friends in the afternoon might release some of the everyday tensions, while being involved in debating what is not right in the city of Harar.

The underlying and often obscure ethics of some Harari are of course changing and modifying. During my final stay in Harar in 2006 and after completing my fieldwork on Muslim saint veneration and its relevance, I was invited to spend the afternoon with my old friend Salah. He had always been critical towards saint veneration but has been afraid to voice his opinion in public since he was considered an outsider by many Harari born in the city. While we sat for *bārça* in his cousin’s house, he fumbled with the remote control of the new TV set to show me a new channel that broadcasted Islamic issues in English. But soon he asked me directly if I had finally found my Wahhabis. This question, if asked directly in the manner Salah asked it, would have immediately caused suspicious glances and wary silence among the participants during my earlier fieldwork. I immediately started to feel uncomfortable, stammered an answer and tried to avoid this topic. However, none of the people present seemed to care and Salah was finally laughing, explaining to me that “now, everything is open. We know each other and nobody is hiding anything anymore.” Boundaries of difference are indeed continuously in the making.