Snakes, People, and Spirits, Volume Two

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Traditional Eastern Africa in its Broader Context

By

Robert Hazel

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

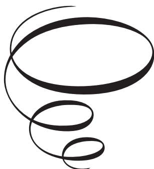

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix

List of Illustrations xi

Introduction xii

Part V: Ophidian Symbolism in Southern Ethiopia

Chapter 5.1 2
Monstrous and Divine Ophidians in Ethiopia and the Eastern Horn
- Box 44. The Tyrannical Serpent of Ancient Abyssinia

Chapter 5.2 10
Snakes as Mythical Genitors
- Box 45. A Brief Profile of the Oromo People
- Box 46. The Oromo and Number Nine
- Box 47. African Spitting Snakes

Chapter 5.3 25
The "Snake Priests" of Southern Ethiopia
- Box 48. *Qallu*-ship among the Oromo: Words and Meanings
- Box 49. Wolabo and Walal: Mythical and Metaphorical Considerations
- Box 50. Religious Leaders and the Highlands
- Box 51. Oromo Snake-Related Terms: Errors and/or Inconsistencies
- Box 52. *Woyu*, *Galalcha*, *Warra Qallu*
- Box 53. Sacred Cloth and Spirit Snakes among the Hoor
- Box 54. The Origin of *Qallu*s: Gabra Perspectives
- Box 55. The Oditu *Qallu* and the Odola Clan of the Rendille: Ancient Connections?
- Box 56. Myrrh and Some of its Uses in the Horn

Concluding Note 90

Conclusions 91

Bibliography 103

Index 1 169
Tribal Identities

Index 2 176
Countries and Regions of Africa

Index 3 179
Themes and Topics

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Volume One:
Illustration 1 194
The Core Motif of the World Health Organization Emblem

Illustration 2 239
The Bamun Double-Headed Snake

Volume Two:
Illustration 3 42
Map of the catchment area of the upper Jubba River

INTRODUCTION

The usual term for ophidians is “snake.” Borrowed from a non-Germanic source, either French or Latin, the word “serpent” tends to be used for more fearsome ophidian species such as highly venomous or very large snakes (Mundkur 1983: 2). As Bodson (1989: 525) points out, “the snake still generates reactions of a basically negative character among Europeans and other Westerners. Even in the case of an inoffensive grass-snake or of a simple slow worm, ‘a good snake is a dead snake’.” Morris et al. (1965: 27) emphasise more generally “the potency of the snake as a basic image.” Willis (1990a: 250) underscores the variety of “symbolic meanings” associated with snakes worldwide and throughout history: In his reckoning, “no other animal is so rich in meaning for the whole human species.” Many other writers have made a similar point, including the following:

—. Deane (1833: 35)

The serpent is the symbol which most generally enters into the mythology of the world.

—. Gerhard (1847)[1]

No animal symbol has such importance and such diverse, even contradictory, meanings than the serpent.

—. Robertson-Smith (1889: 122 fn.)

The snake is an object of superstitions in all countries.

—. Hambly (1931: 69)

There is no other animal which combines so wide a distribution with so many peculiarities, which must be very mysterious to minds not furnished with scientific explanation.

—. Lazenby (1947: 248)

The snake played an important role in ancient life, art, and religion.

—. Mehra (1956: 132)

No species of animal has impressed mankind to the same extent as the snake apparently has.

—. Éliade (1964: 147)[2]

[1] Gerhard was a German specialist of ancient Greek religion and mythology. Excerpt translated and quoted by Charlesworth (2010: 352).

[2] Almost all quotations in French (as in this case), German, or Italian have been translated by the author. A few publications in English have been consulted in their French translation.

Ophidian symbolism is disconcerting. However, all of its features revolve around a single notion: it is immortal because it regenerates itself; therefore, it stands for a power that bestows fertility, knowledge (prophecy), and even immortality.

—. Parrinder (1967: 22)

The snake has had a fascination for men in every land; it is mysterious, fearful and immortal.

—. Pope (1969: 204)

Serpent worship has existed so long and over so much of the earth that the snake must be rated as the most revered of creatures.

—. Chandra Sinha (1975: 15)

No animal is so important and so widely spread as the serpent, which is either religiously worshiped or feared all over the world, except in certain cold countries where it is not found.

—. Pont-Humbert (1995: 378)

The snake stands among all animals as the one whose symbolic profile displays the more striking contrasts.

—. Cazenave (1996: 622)

The symbolic character of the snake is extremely ambiguous and often contradictory. It is so rich in meanings of all sorts that a full account cannot be attempted within a few pages.

—. Wilson (1996: 8)

In all cultures the serpents are prone to be mystically transfigured.

—. Becker (2000: 263)

Among most peoples, the serpent plays an extraordinarily important and extremely diverse role as a symbolic animal.

—. Ferré (2003: 104)

It is without doubt the animal most frequently involved in myths and whose symbolic attributes are the richest.

—. Retief et al. (2005: 189)

Since time immemorial the snake, probably more than any other animal, has been associated with religion and magical powers.

—. Charlesworth (p. 37, 221)

Serpent symbolism pervades human culture. (...) There is no basis to doubt that the snake, above all animals, has provided the human with the most varied and complex symbology.

The image of the snake has been scrutinised by most encyclopaedists while a few writers have devoted a whole book to the topic: Deane (1833), Morris et al. (1965), Pope (1969), Joines (1974), Chandra Sinha (1975), Mundkur (1983), Wilson (2001), and more recently Charlesworth (2010). Some of these publications have a general scope; others, notably those of Wilson, Joines, and Charlesworth, deal with ophidian symbolism in the ancient Middle East and/or the Bible.

No major work on African snake symbolism has ever been published. D. Wagner's thesis, entitled *Die Schlange in Kult, Mythos und Vorstellung der Nordostafrikanischen Stämme* (München, 1970), remains unpublished. The author became aware of it while he was completing the present publication's conclusions. Entitled *Quand le python se déroule*, Roumeguère-Eberhardt's book (1988) is an autobiography. Aside from a few articles dealing with snake bites, the publications focussing on ophidian symbolism or attempting to draw the cultural profile of snakes in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa or in the Horn of Africa are not that many: Roscoe (1909a), Hambly (1931), Portères (1949), Schnell (1949), Clamens (1952), Segy (1954), Eberhardt (1958), Hauenstein (1960, 1978), Villiers (1963), Pâques (1964), Merlo and Vidaud (1966a, 1966b), Willis (1974, one chapter; 1990a), Perret and Denais (1983), Shanklin (1990), Tubiana (1990), Wieck (1990), Jacobson-Widding (1992), Moges (1997), and Bustorf (2010). Some of these publications are short notes. A few of them focus on the python. Also worthy of mention is Weissenborn's two-part paper (1906) on "animal-worship in Africa," which devotes fifteen pages to snakes (p. 173-81; 269-76). Probst-Biraben's short articles (1932, 1933, 1947), all of which relate to Muslim Northern Africa, are also to be noted. The author was unable to lay his hands on an unpublished note on the Fulani of West Africa, written in 1928 by G. Vieillard and entitled "Le génie insatiable. Le serpent inventeur du fer et de l'arc-en-ciel." Needless to say, a large number of ethnographical or ethnological publications focussing on Sub-Saharan Africa refer to ophidians in more or less significant ways.

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Parts One and Three of this publication take up the issue of snake symbolism respectively in general and in the African continent as a whole. The author suspected at the outset that much of the African representations about snakes were age-old and related somehow to ancient Egypt and the Middle East. He therefore embarked upon the task of exhibiting the various patterns of ophidian symbolism in ancient Egypt, in the Middle East (mostly Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Arabia), in ancient Greece, as well as in ancient India. He could hardly avoid studying the status of the snake in Christianity and Islam, given their historical impact, notably on the Horn. Such explorations have resulted in a portion of this publication, i.e. Part II, being more sizeable than originally planned. The readers will discover how illuminating the

insights from those sources turn out to be. They will also realise that Sub-Saharan Africa has long been part and parcel of a larger "civilised" world.

The African continent being so multifaceted, covering the whole ground would have proven overwhelming. Part IV and Part V will focus on the regions of Africa that the author knows best: Eastern Africa, including the Horn as well as some peripheral areas. Few obstacles hampered the migration of individuals and groups across Eastern Africa during the last two or three millennia. Khoisan and Cushitic peoples were soon joined by Nilotes and Bantu-speakers.

In Sub-Saharan Africa supernatural powers were commonly attributed to snakes, which thereby enjoyed a special status in local religions and cultural systems. Ethnologists working in Eastern Africa or in the Horn such as Haberland (1963: 566), Buxton (1973: 294), Fratkin (1974: 28), and Sperber (1975: 9) have respectively underscored the "religious significance" of snakes, their "religious associations," their "mystical nature," or their "almost supernatural" essence.[3] In various portions of Eastern Africa and the Horn, some individuals or social groupings were intimately connected with snakes, including poisonous ones. People believed that certain individuals were capable of transforming themselves into snakes and that serpents could take a human shape. In the areas on which this study mostly focusses, snakes had a more or less equal footing in the animal world and in the spiritual realm. In some cases people did not consider certain snakes reptilian at all but viewed them as supernatural entities originating from the netherworld and representing the ancestors, if not divinity itself.

Taking advantage of the resources from university libraries in North America as well as of the growing number of publications partially or fully available on the Web, the author explored the English, German, French, and Italian ethnographic records rather intensively from 2008 to 2017 in search of evidence of snake beliefs and cults, and for mythical or behavioural illustrations of ophidian symbolism. All the evidence bears witness to the power of analogical thinking in shaping culture and in

[3] Haberland referred to the Oromo (southern Ethiopia), Buxton to the Mandari (southern South Sudan), Fratkin to the Samburu (central Kenya), and Sperber to the Dorze (south-west Ethiopia). In Haberland's German phrasing: "Religiöse Bedeutung der Schlangen." In Sperber's French phrasing: "Le serpent est conçu comme un être quasi surnaturel (…)."

modelling human behaviour in religious life as well as in day-to-day social interaction.

It has not been the author's intention, leaving aside the process of symbolisation, to apply much of a theoretical framework onto the ethnographic record. This study makes its business to explore a large portion of that record, allowing it in some ways to speak for itself. A number of very general, if not universal, themes have been extricated from the diversity of beliefs and representations; for instance, the connection of snakes with the ground, the netherworld or water, and the notion of perpetual regeneration. The ethnographic data will in fact be presented along such lines. Some themes were more or less restricted to particular regions, notably the part played by snakes in totemistic Nilotic South Sudan. The author's ambition was to offer readers a bird's-eye view of his subject matter: East African ophidian symbology[4]; and to dwell upon selected issues in order to get a deeper understanding of the inner workings of analogical thinking as applied to ophidians. Some of the issues are treated conveniently by way of boxes. It is hoped that a more or less clear and coherent picture of what snakes stood for in local cultures will emerge.

Ophidian symbolism was clearly as pronounced and far-reaching in Eastern Africa as elsewhere in Africa and perhaps in past civilisations as well. The general conclusion of this book will notably delineate the specificities of East African snake symbolism compared with what applied to ancient Egypt, in the Mediterranean world, and in Middle-Eastern civilisations.

The author's interest in ophidian symbolism goes back to the early 1980s while he was drafting his PhD dissertation on the age systems of Eastern Africa and the Horn. He then realised the significance of the snake in the shaping of the identity of elders and priestly figures. The present research has been a fascinating experience for him. Hopefully the reader—at times perhaps bewildered by the multiplicity of peoples and representations—will be likewise captivated.

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[4] The notion of "ophidian symbology" refers to the constellation of meanings actually attributed to snakes in a given cultural context. That of "snake symbolism" merely emphasises that snakes are good to think about or that they are a fine raw material for the human imagination.

PART V

OPHIDIAN SYMBOLISM IN SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

Part IV featured a number of case studies that have been subjected to more or less in-depth examination. The present section of this study will outmatch Part IV in this regard since it will focus for the most part on one group of peoples, namely the Oromo. Their ethnographic record is extremely rich. They have fascinated Europeans, whether travellers, missionaries, diplomats, or social scientists over a period of some 150 years. This allows for full-circle analysis. The author's ambition is to make a contribution to the ethnology of the Oromo and in particular to the understanding of their celebrated and mysterious "snake priests."

CHAPTER 5.1

MONSTROUS AND DIVINE-LIKE OPHIDIANS IN ABYSSINIA AND THE EASTERN HORN

A mythical tradition featuring awesome and deadly serpents existed in the Horn of Africa. One of these monsters was familiar to the Tigrinya-speaking Mensa: "In olden times people died at a glance from a large white serpent with big eyes which was known as Heway" (Levine, p. 49).[1] Chapter 4.2 provides two regional instances of monstrous serpents: (a) the Gabbay of the Afar, said to project a dazzling light beam at night and to exude a lethal liquid; (b) a mighty snake that caused earthquakes when infuriated and that was periodically offered milk, butter, honey, and blood from animal sacrifices in its mountain cave by some Janjero women in south-western Ethiopia. Human sacrifices reportedly took place on that mountain, i.e. Mt Bor, before the Amhara outlawed the practice in the early decades of the twentieth century (Levine, p. 50).[2]

The Janjero case brings about the notion of a snake god that had to be placated through offerings, including human sacrifices. These offerings were presumably believed to generate peace and prosperity for whole communities. According to an Abyssinian tradition, two religions coexisted in the country prior to the Christianisation that started in the fourth century CE, i.e. Judaism and the worship of a serpent god (Basset 1882: 96-97). Along with other scholars, Kaplan (1984: 120) stresses that "veneration of snakes was of great antiquity and extremely widespread" in

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[1] An early English account of the legend of *Heway* appeared in published form in 1915. See also McNamee (p. 30).

[2] The Swiss traveller Montandon (1913: 103) was told by some Oromo from a nearby area that the Janjero used to revere large snakes or pythons; and that they kept a number of them in deep pits, feeding them with animals and sometimes with humans whose throats had been cut beforehand. The serpent – earthquake connection may echo the legend of Aido Hwedo in far-away Benin (See chap. 3.3) and other ancient myths from Egypt and India. "Rumbling beneath the ground" was also part and parcel of the legend of Kolelo in eastern Tanzania (See chap. 4.2).

Abyssinia. Numerous communities remained faithful to serpent cults in various parts of the country. The Agaw people and their ruler used to revere an ophidian deity and make sacrifices to it in fourteenth-century central Ethiopia (Tamrat 1972a: 141-43). An Amharic Christian king “received reports that the local people of a small district in Mugär practised pagan worship, sacrificing cows and sheep for the serpent god inhabiting a tree. He immediately ordered that a church be built on the site” (Tamrat 1972b: 237). The Christians of Abyssinia as well as the people who later converted to Islam could only resent such cults, and even more so human sacrifices. According to a well-known story, the first Christian missionaries, who reportedly came from Egypt, took pity on a weeping maiden they found in a tree, awaiting her fate; they implored God with their crosses; the latter killed the monster when it showed up, spilling its blood (Chojnacki, p. 88 fn.; also Perret 2013). Other early missionaries are reported to have killed a snake deity and cut down its sacred tree (Kaplan, p. 120, 122). The legendary founder of a Saho sub-tribe is reported in Eritrea to have liberated a maiden tied to a tree and to have taken the life of a serpent that terrorised the community (Saleh 2007: 114-15). The story recently heard by Bureau (1988) among the Gamo of south-western Ethiopia fits this frame: a young man destroys three great snakes, thereby freeing the three maidens handed out as offerings. Those serpents must have represented snake gods. Among, no doubt, many others, the Amharic, Saho, and Gamo legends appear to echo the ancient story of Perseus rescuing Andromeda, an Abyssinian princess doomed to be devoured—just like the many young people of the kingdom who had previously been offered in sacrifice—by a great snake-like sea monster.[3] The Greek story may betray a sense of cultural superiority, similar to the Christian or Muslim attitude towards human sacrifices. However, the Greek legend was plausibly connected in some ways with various ancient Indo-European myths telling of the demise of a great snake-like or dragon-like primeval monster by a god or cultural hero, its destruction opening the way to a more orderly world.

[3] See chap. 2.2 and also chap. 4.3 for variants from Eastern Africa. Over a century ago, Kirk (p. 319) heard a rehash of the Perseus and Andromeda story in Somaliland.

Box 44

The Tyrannical Serpent of Ancient Abyssinia

Long ago, the people of Tigray in northern Abyssinia were subjected to the whims of a fearsome serpent whose remembered names are Arwe (Doresse 1959: 15; Selassie 1972: 95; Boswell, p. 27-28), Wainaba (Littmann 1947: 43-44; Boswell, p. 24; Scheub, p. 155) or some other designation.[4] It is said that "the Dynasty of the Serpent (…) ruled 400 years" (Jaenen, p. 184; also Basset, p. 213; Littmann, p. 43; Boswell, p. 9). There are many versions of this myth (Staude 1957: 151-55; Boswell, p. 21, 111-12; Perret et al. 1983; Perret 2013). According to some variants, Arwe was born of a human mother impregnated directly or accidentally by a snake or python (Perret et al., p. 142; Selassie, Ibid.). The woman also gave birth to a girl, Arwe's human twin sister. It became cruel and the people offered it young people (especially maidens), goats, sheep, and milk regularly in order to placate it. Doresse (Ibid.) has it that "in the beginning, the country worshipped a serpent to which an annual offering was made of a virgin bound to a tree." In all versions the people become discontented with their cruel overlord. The climax of the story is the guileful killing by fire, iron implements, or poison of the ophidian tyrant by its twin sister, its servant, or a youthful and brave stranger known as Angabo or Gebgebo.[5] In some versions the rescued maiden becomes the queen of Sheba, a cultural hero locally known as Makeda; in others the monster-slayer is rewarded with kingship and his girl child or some female descendant becomes the queen; in yet other versions, Angabo espouses the serpent's sister and sits on the throne. Importantly, the slayer of Arwe is said to be the founder of the Christian dynasty of Abyssinia.[6]

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[4] In central Ethiopia, the serpent-king was also referred to as *atié*, a designation which applied to the king or *negus* of Ethiopia and which meant "emperor" (Griaule 1928: 59 fn.). In the version reported by Allan et al. (p. 126-27), the serpent is not named. The land which it ruled was said to be "Sheba."

[5] A legend from the Arsi Oromo combined the story of Arwe with the theme of the gem-bearing serpent (Bader 2000: 133-34) alluded to in Volume One, chap. 4.3. Referred to above in Box 30 (Volume One, chap. 4.5), the story of the founder of the Buganda kingdom (Uganda) appears to recast the Abyssinian myth of the killing of the primeval Snake Lord. Indeed, the king of Buganda had a "coffee cook," i.e. a man in charge of roasting coffee beans meant to be chewed (Kagwa, p. 11). The ritual cooking of coffee beans was a typically Abyssinian tradition.

[6] A similar myth was told at the southern periphery of Lake Chad. The city of Makari was once ruled by a huge black-and-white-headed serpent which exacted tribute from the people; as they were plotting to overthrow it, a foreign prince

As pointed out in chapter 2.6, Coptic bishops have a crosier "surmounted by a cross between two serpents" which they hold in liturgical services and carry at processions. The underlying assumption is that Christianity prospered on the ruins of paganism, exemplified by snake cults. It is good to recall that the patron saint of Christian Ethiopia is portrayed as a dragon-slayer. Before the sixteenth century, St. George was always depicted killing a serpent—rather than a dragon—usually referred to as Arwe or Kaysi (Chojnacki 1973).[7] But from the standpoint of Christian Abyssinia, the snake was not only the emblem of paganism but also the Great Deceiver of Genesis. The image of Satan transpired from both ends. In mid-nineteenth century Tigray (northern Ethiopia), the people of Guenguendié believed that an ophidian incarnation of Satan known as Gabella lived in a deep cleft on a mountain and that only the prayers of the local monks combined with stoning could keep it subdued (Basset, p. 213).

Even within Christian Abyssinia the serpent is not always depicted as a devilish creature. Bustorf (2010: 636-37) brings forth two paradoxical instances: a serpent acted as a guardian of sacred relics for centuries on; another serpent helped a holy man reach the top of a steep hill. In fact, the legendary Arwe has never been wholly associated with cruelty and death. The mythical serpent was sometimes referred to as "the god of our ancestors" (Perret et al., p. 143). Indeed, some early accounts of the Axumite dynasty held that its initiator was a serpent-king bearing the name of Arwe (Ibid., p. 148; Perret, p. 73). Allegedly, a very important local cereal, *tef*, first sprouted at the very site where Arwe's blood was shed. The amount of *tef* that germinated from the serpent's head was reportedly so great that the local people lived on it for seven years (Staude, p. 154).[8] Arwe's grave has remained a religious shrine in the historically important northern town of Axum. A sacred *warka*, a huge fig tree also

---

came by, challenged the mighty snake and killed it, thereby assuming kingship (Lebeuf et al. 1950: 48-49). In this case, the serpent-slayer is a Muslim. The Phoenician city of Utica near Carthage in ancient Tunisia was reportedly ruled by a "snake-king" (Boswell, p. 71). Every day at noon, said the guardian of the contemporary local museum, a large snake came down from its hill-top tree to drink water from a historic pool (p. 75). The "snake-king" theme may have been a distant echo of Pharaonic rule.

[7] In contemporary Amharic, *kaysi* refers to: a snake; the devil in the form of a snake; a devilish person (G. Y. Getahun, *Advanced Amharic Lexicon: A Supplement to Concise Amharic–English Dictionaries* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003), 236.

[8] This, as Staude (p. 154-55) argues, sets Arwe as an "agrarian" figure. Not unlike some other African ophidian spirits or deities.

known as "Pharaoh's Tree," grew at the centre of Axum's sacred ecclesiastic quarter; Ethiopian emperors have long been crowned next to it (Pankhurst 1955: 82, 83; Boswell, p. 9, 19). Sacred trees, notably large sycamores, loomed large in the ancient religions of Ethiopia (Kaplan, p. 118-19). The great *warka* tree of Axum may have been an abode for the legendary serpent.[9]

It is clear that, on the one hand, the Christian kings wished to distance themselves from an ancient heathen snake-related lordship; on the other hand, the new conquering dynasty may have obliquely co-opted the linkage with the ancient serpent god or king in its quest for legitimacy. It is good to recall at this point that the Amhara and other Semitic-speaking groups of northern Abyssinia originate from southern Arabia, and that snake-gods were commonplace there in ancient times.[10] Boswell (p. 10) and Moges (p. 131) argue for a connection between Negus, the honorific title of the Amharic kings of Abyssinia, and the Hebrew word *nahash*, "snake." More telling is the clearer relatedness of the Amharic term *negus(a)* and the southern Arabic verb *nagasa*, "to exact tribute" (Pankhurst 1955: 46; Abebe 1998: 10). In a way, the tribute-exacting Semitic kings of Abyssinia substituted for the tribute-exacting serpent gods of old. Indeed, the conquering Amharic feudal lords have been reported in some parts of the country to request maidens for their own enjoyment from non-Semitic speaking communities (Bader 2000: 247-48). Similar practices reportedly prevailed in ancient Arabia (Chelhod 1962: 77).[11]

*****

The consideration for snakes was deeply rooted in the Abyssinian cultural heritage. Both Cerulli (1957: 179) and Levine (p. 49-50) emphasise that snakes were commonly held in high esteem in traditional Abyssinia. According to the former, serpents ranked first among the few animals and trees that were believed to be the favourite abodes of spirits. Cerulli makes the point that in a number of Abyssinian communities, such as the Oromo, Wolamo, and Sidama, snakes were reared and cared for as family spirits. He insisted on the special status of snakes in many of his ethnological

[9] Historically, as Marcus (1994: 5) notes, "When the state of Axum emerges into the wider light of history at the end of the first century A.D., it is a full-blown, if not well-integrated, trading state."

[10] See chap. 2.5 in Volume One.

[11] Stories about such lordly abuses were also heard of among the Somali pastoralists (Erlich 1986: 175-76).

studies on the Horn. In his view, the belief that snakes were the abode of spirits was very common among heathen Cushitic and other Abyssinian groups (1930: 48; 1933: 55). The serpent was "considered as the incarnation of a divinity in the pagan religion of the Kushites" (1922: 158). More generally, the "veneration for snakes" was widespread in Ethiopia (1933: 56). As for Levine, he draws in a few lines a telling picture of the religious significance of snakes throughout much of "Greater Ethiopia":

> (…) the serpent is not only credited with special powers but venerated as well. Tigreans believe that their ancestors worshipped serpents and that serpents stand by guarding the monasteries of Tigray at present. (…) The high priests, or *qallu*, of the Borana and Arsi [Oromo] are believed to have descended from the union of a maiden and a serpent. Serpents figure prominently in many Ethiopian myths of origin or creation. (…) The Sidama regard the serpent as the moral hero in their 'Garden of Eden' myth (…). The association of the serpent with fertility is common: Mensa men, for example, traditionally refrained from killing serpents during the period of their wives' pregnancies in order to avoid complications. Many peoples have cults that involve the special breeding and veneration of serpents. Such customs have been reported for the Borana, Guji, Arsi, Derassa, Konso, Gidole, Gawwada, Mocha, Maji, Chara, Welamo, Zala, Koma, and Mekan. The Chara, for example, raise serpents inside their homes, feed them milk and other foods, and accord them sacred respect. The Gawwada king is reported to carry on privileged conversations with a large serpent which is kept in the roof of the royal palace. (Levine, p. 50)

The Chara were reported by Pauli (p. 76) to have a "snake-cult." The senior ritual leader of the nearby Maji officiated at a snake-infested rectangular altar next to his homestead (p. 81).

According to Jaenen (p. 184), those among the Agaw in central or north-eastern Ethiopia who had not become Christians still regarded the snake as "sacred." In central Ethiopia, near the Kambatta area, the Ganza are "distraught on finding a dead serpent" and "not at peace until they bury it" (Moges, p. 130). In the Didessa valley (west-central Ethiopia), according to Haberland (1953: 144), the python was regarded as a "protecting animal" by the Gunza people—possibly the same group as the Ganza—who reportedly kept some such snakes next to them. Gunza men and women used to tie around their arms numerous strips of skin from wild animals, notably snakes (Ibid., p. 143). In the south-western part of the country, the members of the Tsamako chiefly clan buried dead snakes; many ophidians reportedly came to lament at the graves of dead chiefs after the mourners had left (Jensen 1959: 364). As reported by Ernesta

Cerulli (1956: 113), all Wolamo families reared "a black serpent which [was] an object of veneration." Of the aforementioned Mocha, or Shekka, as they named themselves, Cerulli (1933: 55) noted that they raised and fed a special but undetermined type of "sacred" snake held to be the material form of some spiritual being. It was said among the nearby Shangama that Gibbine, a clan founder, and a species of large snakes known as *gitsi* made their appearance in this world at the same place and at the same time (Schulz-Weidner 1959: 129). Gibbine was warned by the high god not to harm *gitsi* snakes because he and these reptiles were of the "same kind." In the same region, a *gitsi* snake impregnated a sleeping girl, whose male child became the founder of the Gitsi clan of the Baka (Jensen 1959: 54-5). D'Abbadie (1890: 199) heard about the "Suwro" or "Makan" whose country extended west of the Kaffa highlands—most probably the Suri or, as they call themselves, the Me'en or Mekan of far south-western Ethiopia—that they "worship a little black snake." Bustorf (2010: 638) mentions that "ritual keeping of serpents" has also been reported of the Walayta, Sidama, Dizi, Hadiya, and Gurage—not to mention the Janjero—all communities located either in central or southern Ethiopia.

Some of the earlier chapters of the present publication, notably chapter 4.8, provide a number of instances of Abyssinian snake-related ritual practices. For example the people of the Kaffa highlands held a black snake known as *Mes-tato* in high regard because of its assumed ability to foretell the future. The nearby Gamo of south-western Ethiopia used some snakes as witnesses that could set persons telling the truth apart from liars. Likewise, the Borana of southern Ethiopia would make a man swear he was telling the truth before a specific tree; a deceiver would be dealt an immediate lethal blow by the resident snake.

A key publication on Oromo religion makes no reference whatsoever to this significant facet of local traditional beliefs and practices (Bartels 1983). Written by a Catholic priest, the book focusses on the Macha or western Oromo, a community that has been strongly influenced by both the Amharic Christian ruling class[12] and Christian missionaries from the West. Gragg's dictionary (1982), which uses western Oromo as a "basic dialect," has many entries referring to traditional religious practices concerned notably with tree spirits. The ethnographic record makes it quite clear that snakes were more prominent among the Oromo—commonly

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[12] As noted by Triulzi (1975: 50), "The Mecca had particularly frequent contacts with their powerful neighbours of the Christian empire north of the [bordering] Abbay [River]."

referred to as Galla in earlier decades—than anywhere else in Eastern Africa. Indeed, according to Trimingham (p. 261), "the snake-cult [was] widespread amongst the Galla." For instance Gullalle (Oromo) native law required the killer of a snake to pay the same amount of blood-wealth as the slayer of a true Oromo person (Cerulli 1930: 51). Likewise, among the snake-respecting Borana (Oromo) of southern Ethiopia, "when [snakes] become so numerous in a district as to become dangerous, the men of the village chase them with long sticks, being careful not to injure them" (Jaenen, p. 185).[13] The Guji, their Oromo neighbours, refrained from killing two types of snakes known as *buti* and *bofa* (Haberland 1963: 379). For various Oromo groups, as we saw above (See chap. 4.5), the killing of a snake was liable to cause misfortune to family and cattle, especially when the killing occurred in the vicinity of one's own house.

In his work on the history of Christianity in Ethiopia, Tamrat (1972b: 179 fn., 196 fn., 237) acknowledges the serpent-cults that prevailed on the Ethiopian highlands before and after the Christianisation process. While the Amharic Christian kingdom was growing in power and influence, the overall perception of the snake shifted significantly in much of Abyssinia. As summed up by Lange (1982: 285-86), "snakes (…) have played and to a certain extent still do play significant positive roles in the symbolic universe of several Ethiopian peoples and categorically negative ones in Ethiopian Christian eschatology."

[13] In Jaenen's understanding (p. 184), the sacred character of snakes in Oromo culture was "possibly a carry-over" from the so-called "Hamitic folklore." As asserted by Leus et al. (p. 71), the "average Borana is inclined to kill any snake on sight." This may be a recent trend. But Korram (1972: 110) supplies the following Oromo proverb: "A viper is the son of a snake." That was said of a man who was a worse person than his father.

CHAPTER 5.2

SNAKES AS MYTHICAL GENITORS IN SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

A significant number of Abyssinian instances exemplifying a positive attitude towards ophidians has been supplied above. With its focus mainly on the large Oromo community, the present chapter will add considerably to the picture.

Box 45

A Brief Profile of the Oromo People

The typically pastoral or agro-pastoral Oromo people used to be known to Westerners as "Galla." In demographic terms they form the largest linguistic and cultural segment of the Ethiopian population. This segment comprises a number of major regional groupings or "confederations" such as the Guji (southern Oromo), Tulama (central Oromo), Macha (western Oromo), Arsi (eastern Oromo), Wollo and Raya (northern Oromo), all of which were further divided into sub-tribal communities. For instance the Gullalle form one of the many Tulama sub-tribes. The southern portion of the Guji community is made up of three territorially distinctive entities: Uraga, Mati, and Hoku, while their northern segment is made up of the Alabdu. The Borana of southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya, and the Orma of the Tana River valley in eastern Kenya, are the southernmost sections of the Oromo people.

The process of Oromo expansion started in south-central Abyssinia in the sixteenth century. In the highlands of the contemporary eastern Arsi, all Oromo were then grouped into two socially distinct, possibly territorial, but politically coordinated halves: the *Borana* and the *Baretuma*. The former was ritually senior and came to be historically associated with the West. Ritually junior, the latter came to be associated with the East.[1] In the

[1] In contemporary Oromo culture, paradoxically, the East (sunrise, birth) has precedence over the West (sunset, death).

course of their expansion, the Oromo have assimilated various non-Oromo communities. In some of the major regional groupings, large-scale integration took place. In such cases, the "true" or "noble" Oromo clans maintained their difference *vis-à-vis* the assimilated groups through the assertion of their ritual seniority. Formerly, each sub-tribal community was self-contained and ruled itself through a sophisticated form of democracy (Legesse 2000). Some southern sub-tribal Oromo communities formed autonomous polities until late in the nineteenth century, when they were integrated *manu militari* in the Ethiopian Empire.

Various mythical traditions deal with the origin of the Oromo. A legend recorded by Triulzi (1994: 598) among the Sayo, a Macha sub-group, told that a maiden gave birth to "the nine *Borana*" after she had tasted salty water from a forbidden mineral spring. As Dahl et al. (p. 25) point out, *horra*, any source of mineral water, may be linked etymologically with terms such as *hormata*, "fertility," and *horomo*, "he who is fertile." On exhorting a person to be fertile, an Oromo would say "*Horri!*" The implication is that salty water and male seminal fluid are analogically interchangeable.[2] A more standard legend is that provided by Cerulli (1957: 127). The Oromo were almost exterminated by their enemies in their original homeland; only one maiden survived and she was impregnated by a spirit, here unidentified; she gave birth to a number of sons who became great warriors; not only did they defeat the foes of their people but they waged war with success in distant places, thereby greatly expanding their realm.

In most Oromo myths of origin, snakes, sometimes river-spirits, play a key role. Some Guji believed that they—especially the "true" Oromo amongst them—derive from the union of the daughter of the sky god and Earth with *bofa guracha*, "snake of the colour black" (Haberland, p. 276, 608).[3] Other legends assert that the "true" Guji descend from the very first humans or from a snake. Likewise, the "true" Alabdu pretended to be the descendants of either a snake or the first people on earth (p. 292-93).[4]

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[2] Prior to circumcision, as the Borana used to say, a youth's semen is "only water" (Baxter 1954: 336 fn.). The word they used for water in the latter case was presumably *bisaan*, the standard term for water, a substance believed to be essential to life.

[3] Any "black" spirit was held by the Oromo to be "beneficent" (Cerulli 1922: 62).

[4] The Konso of southern Ethiopia, who are among the nearest neighbours of the Borana, believed that the first humans had been begotten by snakes (Hallpike, p. 226, 251).

According to Arsi folk traditions, the daughter of the first Oromo, in this case named Wayu, was seized by a river creature known as Boranticha—a large black snake—and impregnated by it (p. 443). As one version of the myth stated, she gave birth to nine boys. Another tradition reckoned that only one half-human, half-ophidian baby named Boficho—from *bofa*, "snake"—resulted from that union. That is why the "pure" Arsi often referred to themselves as *ilmo Boficho*, "the offspring of Boficho" (Ibid.). As for the forebears of the remaining Arsi, they had reportedly been procreated by a yellow snake named Hadiyicha (Ibid.). Many of the other Arsi must have been assimilated members from the neighbouring Hadiya community.

The primeval snake Boranticha was thought to have turned into a spirit; offerings were made to it on river banks in order to prevent intrusions in nearby villages of that greatly feared spirit (Haberland, p. 550). Knutsson (p. 57) labelled Boranticha "the divine serpent." According to Hultin (1990a: 160), it was viewed by the Oromo as "the divinity of rivers." Long ago, Cecchi (1886: 29) regarded it as the "tutelary spirit" of the Oromo people.[5] The association of snakes, especially large snakes such as pythons, with rivers may be rooted in the perception that, seen from some highland—a common feature in Abyssinia—a flowing stream does look like a moving serpent. The Oromo of southern Ethiopia say that pythons are "found only in or near 'big water,' *galaana*" (Leus et al., p. 367). Indeed, it is said that the African Rock Python (*Python sebea*), whose habitat is the tropical African savannah, "likes to be near water and the edges of forest" and that "it often submerges itself near the banks of a stream and waits for prey."[6]

A river spirit is again prominent in the story recounted by the Naqamte, an Oromo-speaking group of the Macha "confederation" strongly influenced by the Christians of northern Ethiopia.

> The daughter of a Christian notable was on the way to her marriage. Her party had to cross a hot dry plain. The members of the bridal group had been warned by her father not to let the maiden rest under a sycamore tree

[5] Conti Rossini (p. 330) states that some Oromo communities venerated an emerald green water serpent named *bora*.

[6] Sources: "African rock python." Accessed November 28, 2012. www.blueplanetbiomes.org/african_rock_python.htm and "Oregon Zoo: Exhibits." Also accessed November 28, 2012. www.oregonzoo.org/Exhibits/PredatorsOfSerengeti/python.htm.

> and drink water from a certain river.[7] But the girl became so tired and thirsty that they let her rest under a great tree and sip water from the nearby stream. At this point, she was impregnated by the spirit of the river. Refusing to go any further, she was abandoned. In due course, she gave birth to nine boys and raised them secretly in the forest. The boys began to speak a new language: Oromo, which was different from that of their mother, i.e. Amhara. They became great warriors, ruled over those they defeated, and begot many children. The nine brothers, it is said, were the initiators of the various groups making up the Oromo people. (Adapted from Triulzi, 1994, p. 597-98)

In this story, the river-spirit is referred to as *ganen*, an Amharic term. According to Rodinson (1967: 59-62), the Amhara expected to meet such spirits in the vicinity of certain trees but *ganen* could also spring from lakes and streams. Such beliefs used to be very widespread in Ethiopia. For instance, although monotheist in pre-Christian times, an Agaw-speaking community of Eritrea known as Bilen (or Blean) "worshipped intermediate spirits" and "high places, groves, streams and other bodies of water were revered as dwelling places of spirits" (Adhana 1988: 748). In central Ethiopia, people believed that cows pasturing near a stream could be fertilised by a water spirit (Griaule 1928: 32-33). This accounted for the fact that some calves were inordinately beautiful or that they displayed unnatural features.

The points raised above fit nicely with the explicitly ophidian identity of the mythical genitor of the Oromo people: *Bofa guracha* ("Black snake") or Boranticha. The version recorded by Hultin (1990a: 159) among the Sibu, another Macha sub-group, is similar to the above. On her way to her future husband's place, a king, the bride-to-be breaks the fasting required of a future wife and drinks water from a river. The king then refuses to wed the virgin whom he had sent for from a distant land. In this story, the impregnating agent is said to be *Setana* (Satan). Another version often heard among the Guduru, also a Macha group strongly influenced by the Coptic Amhara, states that not one but nine maidens were impregnated near a lake and under a *qiltu* tree, a sycamore, the culprit being once again

[7] The sycamore was "the sacred tree of the Galla tribes" (Cerulli 1922: 101). The sycamore was known as "the tree of life" in Christian Ethiopia where it was connected with the cult of Mary, the mother of Jesus (Braukämper 1992: 198). It is good to know that of the various expressions often used to designate Ancient Egypt, one was "the land of the sycamore" (Maspéro, p. 106). The tree was sacred to the Ancient Egyptians, who associated it with a major goddess known as Hathor (Lalouette, p. 140).

the devil himself. Each of the young ladies gave birth to one boy (Triulzi, p. 597). These versions illustrate “the widely known Abyssinian legend according to which the [Oromo] are the sons of the Devil” (Cerulli 1959: 127). The Amhara must have been familiar with the Oromo myth of the primeval ophidian genitor. However, their perception of the snake was compounded by the image of Satan.

Box 46
The Oromo and Number Nine

Nine is the sum total of four and five, two numbers associated with the female and male genders, respectively, among the Macha (Bartels 1969 : 410) and Arsi (Hussein 2004: 108). Three, five, seven, and nine were auspicious for the Macha people (Bartels, p. 418). Nine was a “favourite” number for some Oromo groups (D’Abbadie 1880: 187). It has also been coined “a sacred number” (Jaenen, p. 182) or “the highest of the ‘holy’ odd numbers” (Bartels, p. 419). In a more recent publication, Bartels (1983: 147) states that nine is a symbol of “fullness” while, according to Hultin (1990a: 159), that number is a sign of fertility for the same Macha Oromo. Accordingly, various central and eastern Oromo groups believed that there were nine original Oromo sections (Cerulli 1930: 35, 51; Haberland, p. 443). For instance a Guduru tradition holds that the mythical ancestor of the Oromo sired nine sons (D’Abbadie, p. 170). “Nine are the children of the aged,” says a Macha “counting song” (Jaenen, p. 173). This may refer either to the nine putative founders of the major Oromo segments or to a complete expression of human fertility. The valuation of the number nine by some of the northern Oromo may have resulted from their being influenced by their northern neighbours. It was widely reported that the conversion of the Ethiopian kingdom to Christianity had been carried out by a group of nine saints hailing from the Nile valley (Perret, p. 73).

The southern Oromo perception of number nine was at variance to a significant extent with that valuation. Among the Guji, the numbers associated with men and women were four and three, respectively (Haberland, p. 376; Hinnant 1977: 75),[8], rather than five and four. Odd numbers were associated with women and female activities in Gujiland

[8] The same pattern obtained with the nearby Hadiya (Arficio, p. 133). Amongst the Nyoro of western Uganda, three and four were associated with femininity and masculinity, respectively, while nine was regarded as “the ‘auspicious’ number *par excellence*” (Beattie 1978: 282).