

FEAST FOR HEALTH: ATETE POSSESSION RITUAL IN WALLO

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ABSTRACT

This study historically contextualizes the adoption of the Atete spirit possession and the rituals associated with it following the settlement in Wallo of the Oromo from the end of the sixteenth century or the beginning of the seventeenth century. Though the ritual has persisted in the rural areas until the present time, the majority of women in most urban centers were compelled to stop offering feasts to the Atete spirit in the years following the coming to power of the military government in 1974. Despite the dearth of written sources in the area under investigation, the study makes use of oral tradition, and knowledgeable informants endeavored to reconstruct the locally held beliefs in respect of Atete possession and the ritual practices deemed indispensable to cajole and create peace with this naturally non-violent spirit, and its adaptation to the new cultural and religious environment. The research, which is extensively based on oral sources, does not claim to be exhaustive. However, it will hopefully cast useful insight into this poorly documented and investigated subject.

Keywords: Atete, Chelle, feast, fertility, health, Oromo, ritual, Wallo, wellbeing

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ጥናቱ በወሎ ታሪክ የአቴቴ መንፈሳዊ አምልኮ ከአሰራ ሲድሰተኛው ክፍለዘመን መጨረሻ ወይም ከአሰራ ሰባተኛው ክፍለ ዘመን መጀመሪያ አንስቶ የአሮሞዎችን ወደአካበቢው መምጣትን ተከትሎ ከወቅቱ ጋር ተያያዥነት ያላቸውን አምልኮታዊ ሥነ-ሥርዓቶችን ይዳሰሳል። ምንም እንኳን የአምልኮ ሥርዓቱ አሰከ አሁን ድረስ በገጠር ውስጥ ቢኖርም ፣ በአብዛኛዎቹ የከተማ ማዕከላት ውስጥ የሚገኙት ሴቶች በ1974 የወታደራዊው መንግስት ወደ ሰልጣን መምጣትን ተከትሎ ለአቴቴ መንፈስ ድግሶችን ማቅረባቸውን እንዲያቆሙ ተገደዋል። ምንም እንኳን ለዚህ ጥናት ሊያገለግሉ የሚችሉ የጽሑፍ ምንጮች አናሳ ቢሆኑም፣ ጥናቱ ትውፊቶችን እና፣ በነገሩ ላይ እውቀት ያላቸው መረጃ ሰጭዎችን በመጠቀም የአቴቴን ታሪክ ተደራሽ ማድረግ የመጣጥፉ ዋና ትኩረት ነው። በሰፊው የቃል ምንጮች ላይ የተመሰረተው ይህ ምርምር ሙሉ በሙሉ የተሟላ ነው ለማለት አያስችልም። ሆኖም ርዕሰ ጉዳዩ በስፋት ያልተመዘገበ እና ያልተመረመረ ከመሆኑ አንጻር ይህ ጥናት ለአንባቢያን ጠቃሚ ግንዛቤን ይሰጣል።

“No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking.”—Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) “The Science of Custom.” *Patterns of Culture* (1934)

ATETE IN WALLO: A VIEW FROM WITHIN

The origin of Atete possession in Wallo, according to local oral tradition, has been associated with the earliest Oromo settlement in the region, which goes as far back as the end of the sixteenth century or the beginning of the seventeenth century. Local oral tradition has it that Atete was first brought to Wallo by people, presumably the Oromo, who conquered and controlled the region crossing the Mofer Woha (Mofer River).¹ This assertion roughly indicates the South–North direction of the Oromo peoples’ expansion and their eventual settlement in Wallo, together with their indigenous beliefs and practices, of which Atete was just one among others.

Most Atete-possessed women (also known as ‘Balle Chelle’)² emphasized the fact that this particular spirit preferred to be propitiated by the Oromo language rather than other languages. At the start of the Atete possession ritual a phrase such as: *Ateteyo waggatu gau gae* (lit. trans.: “O, Atete! The time has come”)³ was often heard. The requisite “invocation” and propitiation skills often came from some elderly women who would formally be invited to provide their expert service to the *Balle Chelle* during the ritual session.⁴

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- 1 Mofer Woha is a tributary of the Abbay River flowing in between the regions of Menz and Tegulet in north Shewa and bordering the province of Wallo. Oral informants.
 - 2 Another appellation of ‘Atete’ was ‘Chelle’; *chelle*, also called *doqa*, literally means “beads”.
 - 3 Trimingham hinted at the invocation of Atete as ‘the Mother Creatress’ (*ya ayo umtu*),’ see Spencer Trimingham. *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1965): 259.
 - 4 Oral Informants.

Women were known to be highly susceptible to some mild illnesses arising from their enraged Atete spirits. Although Atete was generally considered feminine and a non-malevolent possessing spiritual entity, some degree of malevolence may have been manifested either in those who claimed to have inherited the spirit from their parents or who had suddenly been entered by the spirit. Such wickedness was said to be an expected backlash when the spirit was totally ignored, mistreated and improperly appeased or when it “attacked” and/or “possessed” the opposite sex. Besides being heritable, Atete was often perceived as a household deity and protector of a family.⁵ Periodic sickness, physical injury or poor health in a family was seldom attributed to the negligence of the spirit’s would-be inheritor to honoring Atete and offering its yearly feast. As the belief in Atete was preceded by other possessive spirits such as the Zar, Buda and Jinn in the region, a great deal of modification and syncretism had taken place in the perception and conduct of the Atete ritual.

Apart from its depiction as a “goddess of fertility” (Trimingham 18) and fecundity (Knutsson 55; Blundell 511), Atete as a helpful spirit whose alleged capability in defeating barrenness or infertility, protecting children and ensuring a family’s continuity was well recognized. In Wollega, says Daniel, Atete, the name of the festivity in honor of Mariam (Cerulli 127)⁶ or Ayole, ‘The Little Mother,’ was held as a thanksgiving by “[women] who have children and lamentations by the barren” (Daniel 7, 25–29).⁷ Moreover, Atete as a

5 Oral Informants.

6 According to Cerulli, the inclusion of *Mariam* in the ritual seemed to have been the result of the admixture of the belief in *Atete* with that of the survival of the cult of the Virgin Mary in the formerly Christian areas taken over by the Oromo. See Emerico Cerulli, “The Folk-Literature of the [Oromo] of Southern Abyssinia,” *Harvard African Studies*, III (1922): 127.

7 Daniel Ayana, “Protestant Mission in Wollega: A Study of the Activities of the Missions and the Local Converts 1898-1935,” Addis Ababa University, M.A. History (1984): 7, 25-29.

senior female Ayana of the Oromo was “propitiated with the sacrifice of [a] goat” (Trimingham 34). After mentioning Atete as a female deity of the Oromo, Krapf remarked in the nineteenth century that the Oromo in Shewa “offer sacrifices in the month of September, at which time their priests called kallitshsh [*sic*], foretell the incidences of the coming year . . . which they think . . . may grant to the people a good harvest and other temporal blessings (192).” For Tippet (157), Atete was cherished and worshipped as a spirit of motherhood. Unlike Krapf’s description of men’s involvement in the ritual, Atete in Wollo, which had nothing to do with Mariam or a divinity, was solely an affair of women that was mainly geared towards securing sound health and long life, and maintaining the economic wellbeing and internal harmony of a family.

Hence, it can safely be assumed that the Atete ritual, which ceased to be a communal affair or a festivity in honor of a divinity, as argued by Krapf, began to assume other important spiritual and domestic roles. Qashu argued that in Arsi, Atete had been “a highly political and power laden” institution of women with whom they actively resolved disputes using the Atete musical ritual as an instrument of indigenous dispute resolution mechanism as well as to resist “oppression and abuse, and also to assert, protect, promote, and claim their rights” (115). Recently, Temam Hajiadem Hussein asserted that in Arsi and Shewa Atete ritual, besides being a sociocultural tool for defending women’s right, it had periodically been performed to tackle and ward off a plethora of communal, group, household and interpersonal challenges or disagreements. (Hussein 15–30)⁸ Jeylan W. Hussein also noted the Atete ritual as “a prime source and guardian of the female individuals’ morality” and as a group effort to “exert pressure on male domination” (70–75).

8 For women as a mediator in group conflict using the Atete ritual songs, see Jemila Adem, “Women and Indigenous Conflict Resolution Institutions in Oromia: Experience from *Siinqee* of the *Wayyu Shanan* Arsi Oromo in Adami Tullu Jiddu Kombolcha District of the Oromia National Regional State,” M.A. thesis, Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University, 2014, pp. 70–75.

Initially a non-possessing spirit, now in a different socio-cultural and religious climate, it began to be perceived as a kind of “intrusive” and/or guardian spirit of both Christian and Muslim women, and to which a distinctive material offering and ritual had been tailored to appease it and obtain its spiritual blessings and protection (70–75). The multi-functional role of the Atete ritual as indicated above were not entirely transplanted to, and applied in, Wallo. Irrespective of their ethnic and religious background, Atete’s spiritual protection of housewives, widows and even to unmarried women clearly demonstrated its adaptive nature and transformation. It appears that *chelle*, which literally means “a green or grassy spot” where the Atete ritual had originally been celebrated in a group setting, seemed gradually to have been changed into a non-natural object of a string of colorful beads which served the Balle Chelle as an abode and personification of the Atete spirit.

Atete-possessed women earnestly believed that if they did not propitiate the spirit periodically, it would make them and their family vulnerable to ill-health and other misfortunes. It was also believed that Atete always required unquestioning submission and recognition from the purportedly possessed, as well as her marriage partner or the Abba Wora (male head of the household). To establish an amicable relation with their spirit, the Balle Chelle had to make ready the spirit’s favorite material tributes, together with an elaborate feast offering once a year. The family gathering for this festive occasion was characterized by ululation and a joyful celebratory mood of all the participants. Only through this method was Atete’s guardianship and spiritual blessing said to be guaranteed to the family members for the coming year.⁹ Hence, Atete’s numinous assistance was to be sought and acquired only by preparing its yearly jovial ceremony at a household level. It is therefore vital to underline that Atete ritual has never been a community affair where large

9 On the feast of Atete, see Lambert Bartels, *Oromo Religion: Myths and Rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia: An Attempt to Understand* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1983) 124–129; also Enerico Cerulli, “The Folk-Literature of the [Oromo] of Southern Abyssinia,” 127.

numbers of people would come together to pray either to ward off or mitigate animal or human diseases and other natural calamities. Such a communal prayer session was one among the many variants of the *wadaja* ritual (Balcha 2017: 40–52). According to local oral tradition, the Oromo began to disseminate the culture of preparing *wadaja* in the region. Depending largely on their purported helpfulness to the local population, the *wadaja* and Atete rituals (though declining from time to time) as vestiges of the Oromo cultural domination still function in the predominantly Muslim-inhabited and Oromo-speaking parts of rural Wallo (42). This may also have been due to lack of substantive socio-economic and cultural transformation, and the exposure to change their ingrained outlook regarding the natural and the supernatural worlds as expounded by the two major religions of Orthodox Christianity and Islam among the rural public.

Atete was identified under various names: Atete Gimbi, Atete Hara, Atete Dula, Atete Borena, Atete Gurage, and so forth. The place names attached as suffixes would seem to indicate the spatial diffusion and adaptation of the spirit over a wide geographic area. The domestic servants working in the court of Ras (later Negus) Mikael, many of whom had been brought from the southwestern part of Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were believed to have introduced some variants of the Atete ritual in the town of Dessie.¹⁰ Considering the probably of its vast geographical coverage and regional variations, Desta Tekle Wold classified Atete with reference to the color of the beads.¹¹ He asserted that the white and red beads were for Atete Dula; the black and white for Atete Gimbi, while the green beads were for Atete Hara.¹² He seemed to have confused Atete with other spirits such as Zar and

10 Oral Informants.

11 አቴቴ፣ ዛር፣ በሱት ስም የምትጠራ ውቃቢ ዐማሮች [ከአሮሞች] የወረሱት፣ ጨሌ የሚያጠልቁላት ... እንቀት የሚቀቅሉላት አምልኮ ባእድ፣ ትርጓሜው ጠባቂ ማለት ነው። Desta Tekle Wold, *The New Amharic Dictionary* (Amharic), (A.A., Artistic Printing Press, 1962 E.C.)

12 'አቴቴ ግንቢ፣ አቴቴ ሐራ፣ አቴቴ ዱላ፣' እያሉ በ3 ዐይነት አምልኮ፡ ያምልኩታል፣ ነጩንና ቀዩን የዱላ፡ ጥቁሩንና ነጩን የግንቢ፣ አርጓዴውን የሐራ ይሉታል (Ibid):

Wuqabi. Nonetheless, viewing a single spirit as a multiple entity underpinned the inherent oversimplification and misconception of spirit possession complaints and rituals among church people such as Desta.

Besides the above classification based on the color of the beads, Atete was widely regarded as a source of an assortment of personal and family misfortunes. As hinted above, preparation of a *chelle* feast was the principal means of mitigating purported impending misfortune(s). A *chelle* feast would not be prepared at all during fasting months or days. Most of the time, offerings to Atete constituted split steeped and boiled barley (*qinche*) draped with unsalted and un-spiced butter and flavored with fresh leaves of *kassie* (*Lantana salvifolia*), wheat bread, roasted cereals (*qollo*), popcorn, coffee, *lomi* (*Citrus medica*), *tringo* (*Citrus grandis*) and unfermented honey (*birz*) and/or *buqrie* (a drink made of unleavened barely bread (*qita*) without *gesho* (*Rhamnus prinoides*)); the burning of Frankincense or Etan (*Boswellia papyrifera*) and sandalwood; spraying perfume; spreading fresh grass or *serdo* (*Cynodon dactylon*) and other sweet-smelling herbs such as *ergo lega*, *ashekuti* (*Rhus vulgaris*), *ariti* (*Artemisia afra*), *ketetena* (*Verbascum sinaiticum*) and *tej sar* (*Cymbopogon citratus*).¹³ Irrespective of the economic status or the intrinsic nature of the ceremony, the spirit would not at all require the Balle Chelle to make animal sacrifices (Ayana 33–34). The Balle Chelle, being anointed with butter, and flamboyantly dressed and decorated with ornaments, consumed some roasted coffee beans in the husk soaked in butter. This signified the beginning of the festivity which would often

13 A less elaborate feast was similarly prepared for a group of local “protective spiritual beings” known commonly as ‘Qolle’ (Qollo in Oromifa). These spirits were believed “to exact tributes in return for physical and emotional security and deal out punishments for failure to recognize them.” See Ronald Reminick, “The Evil-Eye Belief Among the Amhara of Ethiopia,” *Ethnology*, 18 (1974): 280; oftentimes, some communicable diseases and other human predicaments were attributed to the wrath of these protective Qolle spirits who resided in some natural objects.

involve members of the household, relatives and immediate neighbors. Those who did not attend the first ritual evening would not be allowed to join and take part in the feast at all.

The ceremony lasted for not more than three consecutive days. During this time, ritual purity such as abstinence from sex and personal cleanliness (e.g., body washing before and after the ceremony) would be strictly observed by the Balle Chelle, who slept alone for some time before and during the ritual nights. It was only after wiping out all the garbage and dumping it somewhere on the outside that the ceremony was said to be formally concluded. The garbage, including the coffee residual collected during the ritual days, would be deposited at a secluded spot. The procedure of garbage disposal underpinned the belief that all the nuisances of the Balle Chelle and her household were said to be ritually removed. Honoring and placating or propitiating the Atete spirit in the proper manner was the major wished-for outcomes of this whole process; and by so doing, it was believed that the spirit would be swayed to grant its spiritual aegis to the Balle Chelle, her spouse and to her children, too.

What should be underlined here is that the Atete spirit being non-violent in nature did not communicate or manifest itself through the Balle Chelle in ecstatic, epileptic or any kind of violent bodily movement.¹⁴ However, the ritual ceremony was expected to be concluded after the Balle Chelle “experienced” some sort of “incubus” or “mystical contact” with the Atete spirit through the wearing of the beads. Unlike other possessive spirits, Atete did not express its demands in any concrete form.¹⁵ However, if a woman complained about persistent headache, mild heart problems, itching or frequent “dreaming” of a spirit, Atete possession was often suspected. As a rule, such a grumpy woman would be advised to

14 Only Helen Pankhurst argued that *Chelle* was able to manifest itself “at a particular time, often in July.” See Helen Pankhurst, “What Change and for Whom? The Case of Women in Menz,” *Ethiopia: Rural Development Options*, Siegfried Pausewang et al., eds., London: Zed Books Ltd. (1990) 154.

15 Oral Informants.

consult other Balle Chelle women, spiritual healer(s) such as a Balle Wuqabi, or a cleric diviner such as a Metsehaf Gelache (Book Opener). These individuals were expected to diagnose such discomforts or illnesses, and fix the color of the beads in addition to the spirit's favorite items that suited the specific choice of the Atete spirit; this meant that the diagnosticians would readily cater for the needs of the future Balle Chelle.¹⁶

After that, the newly-initiated Balle Chelle should buy her spirit's favorite beads from the market. The colorful small beads (Amharic *chelle*) being dedicated to Atete served as a symbolic representation, if not a fetish object, of the allegedly possessing spirit. Perceived as the spirit's purified container, the beads sifted through a piece of thread, and smeared with butter and perfume were to be worn by the Balle Chelle as a necklace during the Atete ritual. This preparation for the Atete ritual seemed to reinforce the notion of what may be considered as an indispensable effort to alleviate "the mystical trouble" the Balle Chelle was periodically suffering from its spirit familiar. The beads were usually kept in a hand-woven straw basket known as '*mudaye*'.¹⁷ As a signal of the forthcoming festive offering for the Atete spirit, the Balle Chelle had to wash her body with the water used for the preparation of the barley malt or *biqil* (an ingredient for the production of *buqrie*). This act was taken as the Balle Chelle's vow-making and her avowed commitment to offering the *chelle* feast sometime in the near future. Anxious not to offend her protective spirit, the Balle Chelle would go to great lengths to ensure that all her commitments were properly met. It is worth noting that the ritual was regularly conducted at a time when the price of butter would be cheaper, that is, after the end of Kiremt (the long rainy season) and in the weeks between New Year or Addis Amet (September) and Tikemt (October–November). At the end of the festive offering, the beads would be removed from the collar of the Balle Chelle to be kept in the *muday*, along with perfume and other aromatic items. On occasions such as sudden sickness or discomfort,

16 Oral Informants.

17 Oral Informants.

the Balle Chelle would propitiate her guardian Atete spirit by putting a string of the colored beads around her neck like a necklace.¹⁸ This meant that the beads consecrated to Atete would seem to serve as a preventative and therapeutically useful item.

It was also believed that men could be “attacked” by the Atete spirit, particularly if they had the audacity to laugh at or mock a *chelle* ritual or similar other acts that would displease his possessed spouse and the possessing spirit. The rationale behind this notion seemed to be both sociological and psychological. In most traditional societies where spirit possession was described in an “idiom of coercive power” (Bauer 236), and where women were mostly kept as housewives tied up with household chores and with very little or no personal income, the husbands would cover all the necessary expenses needed for the preparation of the *chelle* ceremony. In addition, husbands had the moral obligation to satisfy the needs of their spouses because to concede to such demands would also enable them to express their sympathy to, and share the concerns with, their wives. This co-operative involvement, which might be termed soliciting the “unbounded spiritual protection of the Atete on a contractual basis,” would please the possessing spirit which would, in turn, help husbands get some sort of psychological assistance and confidence in their future endeavors.¹⁹

Considering the spirit’s assumed potential afflicting power and possible withdrawal of its guardianship from the whole family, husbands had very little choice in neglecting or pushing aside the demands of their Atete-possessed wives. Moreover, Atete’s displeasure was also conceived as a potential source of misfortune, such as series of bereavements in the family, poor harvest, loss of animals or fortune of all sorts, and a general failure in health (Balcha 39). All too often, thinking of such serious penalties would naturally persuade husbands to be tolerant, if not enthusiastically co-operative, to the problems of their respective spouses. In this context, it can be argued that the complaints of the possessed seemed to serve as the

18 Oral Informants.

19 Personal communication with Oral Informants.

voice of the feminine and “the only . . . sphere in which women [would strive to] have power” (Pankhurst 151) in a predominantly patriarchal or male-dominated society. Maintaining harmonious marital relationships and the welfare of the whole family through the alleged assurance of the Atete were the major outcomes of the whole affair.

In contrast, Atete possession was also regarded as an abominable, non-religious and disreputable belief, a conviction that exposed the Balle Chelle to frequent excommunication by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In contrast to other spirit possession illnesses, which would entail a range of physical and mental derangements and to which the clergy had very little to offer, the attack of church leaders against the Atete appears to have been a relatively simple task.²⁰ In fact, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, though not always successful, had a long history of posing serious challenges to indigenous beliefs and practices. It is also worth noting that a large percentage of women would stop offering feasts to or “worshipping” Atete when they got older and when they decided to repent.²¹

As part of his far-reaching religious policy, Emperor Yohannes IV (1872–1889) is known to have forbidden what he considered non-religious or devilish beliefs, such as the Zar and Atete, and the associated Wadaja and Chelle rituals. Severe penalties, including corporal punishment, were meted out to the ritual experts and to the alleged possessed persons.²² Because of the sudden death of the emperor while fighting the Mahdists at Matamma, however, these extreme measures had failed to bring about a change in the public’s long-held indigenous cosmological and etiological beliefs and practices. Much later on, particularly a few years before the Italian invasion, the martyr Abuna Petros launched another serious campaign against non-Christian beliefs and practices in the region.

20 For example, Atete is not at all mentioned in almost all medico-magical texts, including the *Awda Negast*, a divinatory text that deals with spiritual illnesses and their alleged material and non-material cures.

21 Oral Informants.

22 Oral Informants.

This campaign had a very limited impact and the belief in Atete persisted for several decades thereafter, argued oral informants.

FINAL REMARKS

Despite the prominently politico-religious attacks of Emperor Yohannes and Abuna Petros, the Atete ritual in Wollo was able to endure and continue to survive during much of the second half of the twentieth century. However, the change in the socio-economic condition of the general public following the coming to power of the military government in the early 1970s, and its concerted attack against indigenous beliefs and practices may be taken as a turning point in the history of the Atete ritual. As Helen Pankhurst succinctly remarked, “In post-revolutionary Ethiopia there have been campaigns to encourage people to throw away the trappings of spirit-beliefs: beads and other spiritual paraphernalia” (150). Additionally, the Church’s²³ consistent, yet very modest, sermonizing effort appears to have persuaded many of the Atete devotees to refrain from engaging in *chelle* rituals. More importantly, however, economic considerations seem to have played a major role in the apparent decline in complaints leveled against Atete possession and the generous festive offerings that accompanied them. As most devotees found themselves in a precarious economic situation in which they needed to meet their daily sustenance, it would be problematic for them to satisfy the lavish needs of their spirit familiars. Yet, the observable decline in Atete ritual at present begs a thorough investigation of the subject from a historical perspective. It is also vital to conduct similar scholarly investigations into other equally declining spirit possession illnesses.

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