The Myth of the Tishana-Me’en “Kingship” (Southern Ethiopia)

Ideological Reflections of Socioeconomic Change

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1. Introduction

The oral tradition of the Tishana Me’en, an ethnic group of about 60,000 shifting cultivators in southern Kafa, Ethiopia, is in a process of radical reorientation. The Me’en, who are largely nonliterate, never had an organized and formally transmitted historical tradition, either by means of memorized speech or by precise genealogical lists, but their clans and lineages have stories of their origin, growth, dispersal, and of notable leaders (compare Vansina [1985: 14 f.] for genres of oral narrative). The transmission of this informal but rich body of oral tradition is variable and subject to modification. Indeed, Tishana-Me’en life is changing to such an extent that many of these stories of origin are not only modified and “impoverished” but are also disappearing. This process is not only due to the nonstandardized and nonformal character of the oral tradition, which discourages structured transmission, but is also a reflection of important political and economic changes in the society and group identity of this formerly agro-pastoral people.

These changes have become especially pertinent in the last few decades and comprise the following:
1. erosion of the pastoral way of life (partly due to loss of cattle) and change towards a mode of subsistence based on horticulture and grain cultivation;
2. loosening of the economic and sociocultural bonds with the agro-pastoral lowland Me’en, like the Dabashinto (or “Nyomonit”), the Chirim, and the Mela;
3. incorporation of Dizi and Bench people, and resultant assimilative tendencies;
4. increasing political incorporation into the wider Ethiopian society;
5. the start of a Christian missionary enterprise among them by the S.I.M. (Society for International Missions) and the K’aalehiwyot Church. A mission station was built in the northern Me’en area (in Tik’imt Eshet, south of Shawa Bench town) in 1991, aimed at forming educated Christian cadres among them, while also giving medical aid, and starting a literacy program and supplementary primary education (up to grade 6) in the Me’en language. This approach is in line with official Ethiopian state policy (after 1991) of educating the various ethnic groups in their own language, at least in the first formative years in primary school.

While the effects of the changes of the first three kinds have been endogenous, gradual ones, those of the last two may be radical, and if we were nostalgic about the way of life of the Me’en as an independent, autonomous people, we could say that all this will probably lead to another case of a people losing their original character and sociocultural integrity, without being quite sure of the effects and benefits of all the changes.

2. The Nature of Oral Tradition among the Me’en

In this article I present a dominant version of the “origin myth” of the Tishana Me’en (in the highlands north of the village of Maji up to Shawa Bench). This myth is a particular and telling reflection of changes in the Me’en way of life in the first half of this century, when a large part of the people had gradually moved out of the Shorum and Omo River valleys into the more temperate highland zones. As already emphasized in a previous study (Abbink 1992), Me’en oral tradition is not a body of canonized stories, told and handed down by
specialists. It is neither a guarded tradition from which people can derive claims to lands, etc. The Tishana-Me'en do not keep a "royal tradition" or genealogy either.

The Me'en are originally an "acephalous" society, i.e., without recognised leadership positions in a political sense. Only a limited number of original clans (kabucoch) have hereditary lines of authority, some of whom were recognised throughout the Me'en population, e.g., those of the komoruts, or "rain controllers," who originally had somewhat of a priestly, mediatory function. The Me'en oral tradition as a whole is a conglomerate of shifting clan, family, and migration histories. While it reflects complicated patterns of descent and alliance, the tradition is not formalized or centralized, and not transmitted in a controlled manner. The stories reflect the dynamics of social relations between people and groups at certain points in time, although with the memory of clan and lineage lines showing continuity and orientation. Me'en myths or stories can neither be seen in abstract terms as a body of elaborate, systematic analogies of relations or problems in the human domain with those in the animal or the natural domain, as in the American Indian myths as, e.g., analyzed by Lévi-Strauss in his famous "Mythologiques" (1964–71) and later works. Me'en myths or stories have a tinge of legend, containing a native interpretation of local and group history.

The myth which follows fits into this pattern. From an historical point of view, it is an unique piece of information which will never be recorded again, being a fleeting though cogent reflection of a crucial phase in Me'en history. It is the product of a situation which the Me'en already have gone beyond. For example, the power and prestige of the komoruts and the ancestors mentioned here is substantially reduced, the territorial groups are more and more dispersed, and new authority structures, e.g., through the k'ebele and the Me'en self-organization (since 1992, set up by the new authorities), having introduced new leadership positions tied to the central state administration. The myth illustrates the dynamic and shifting character of oral traditions and group identity by presenting a version of indigenous history and group relations at one juncture, but still is the sediment of a general process of change.

3. The Story

To make sense of the story, a brief comment on the nature of Tishana Me'en2 society and history may be necessary. They linguistically belong to the South-East Surmic subgroup within Nilo-Saharan, and live in a patrilineal, decentralized society, economically based on the subsistence cultivation of sorghum, maize, wheat, t'eff, and horticultural crops (cabbage, coffee, peas, beans, taro). The Me'en also hunt, gather, and exploit beehives (honey is one of their scarce cash crops). They hold livestock (cattle, goats, sheep), but in small numbers. The southern Me'en, northeast and east of the town of Maji, have larger numbers of cattle, often placed among the herds of Bodi-Me'en relatives and bond friends living across the Shorum and Omo Rivers. Sufficient rainfall is crucial for both agriculture and cattle-keeping. However, rain is always unreliable. Thus, the "rain masters" traditionally had an important ritual function, which was especially marked in the period that the Me'en were predominantly agro-pastoralists. Their political structure was traditionally egalitarian. Since the late 19th century, the Me'en, many of whom moved into the highlands northwest of the Shorum- Omo Valley, have been in contact with highlanders (like Dizi, Kaficho, Bench, and northern immigrants), but some measure of political incorporation started only in the revolutionary period (1974–1991). In 1977 a new rural organizational framework was introduced: the k'ebele peasant associations. Most (but not all) Me'en were included in them, leading to a change of the internal authority structures, and often to divisions within

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1 This version is mainly based on the story told by Serewa, a man of the Mo'ach clan, and recorded in 1968 by Mr. William F. Muldrow, the first teacher/missionary in the Me'en area (in the 1960s). I checked this story with other Me'en (e.g., with Kamane Boshu of Dulum, in October 1989) and basically got the same information, but in a more fragmented form. I also consulted Ato Teka Aba Mamo of Bach'uma village in various conversations during 1991 and 1992. I am very grateful to these informants.

In 1990, while on a trip in the southern Me'en area, I did not succeed in meeting Serewa, who was then living in Ch'iru k'ebele, near the former village of Shasha. In June 1993, I tried again, but then heard that he had died about a year before.

Serewa's story is the best and most complete version, and therefore serves as the basis of the text presented here. I deeply appreciate Mr. Muldrow's generosity in sharing with me his knowledge on the Me'en.

2 "Tishana" is a greeting in the Me'en language, used by northern immigrants to designate the Me'en. It is used here to differentiate the Me'en (northwest of the Omo) from the Mela, Chirim, and Dabashinto ("Nyomour").

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the local community. In 1993, the new EPRDF authorities in the area stimulated the formation of an ethnic Me'en self-organization, and leading members of this grouping, supervised by the ruling party, have gradually been installed as officials of the local administration in the Me'en area, replacing northerners. Traditional Me'en leaders like komoruts, clan elders and folk healers/diviners are not directly involved in this new administrative structure. But they retain their influence in local life in other spheres.

The Text

When the Tishena lived in Chomu,4 they became too crowded; their country became too small. During dry years it was hard. Nyamon Shua5 was the “king.” Nyamon was Lord of the world . . . He had two sons, Banja and Boshu. Boshu was the younger. Also there was Koli, who was a Tishana, but not related to Nyamon6 . . . he was Shua’s koko.7 Koli’s people and Shua’s people could intermarry. Also there was a “servant group” of the Tishena called Yidinit,8 who were the servants of the “king” and his family, and could not intermarry with them.

Shua sent the Yidinit to the high country to the east to look for a new country. They came back to report that they had found a good country, with wide grasslands and rivers and mountains.

Shua called his older son Banja. He gave Banja some cattle, including the “king’s cow,” called bi-de-keti, which had one horn pointed to the ground and the other to the sky.9 He also gave him grain-seeds and spears, machetes,10 and hoes. Along with this he was given instructions as how to live – how to build his houses, plant grain, etc. Then, blessing him by the traditional spraying with a mouthful of coffee, he sent him to the new country to find a place to live.

Banja then went, with many of his people, with cattle and the “king cow” and with the seeds his father Shua had given him. By way of Tirma11 and Dimi, he came to Dimut, a country which lies to the north of Shasha12 and towards the Shorum river.13 Koli came with Banja and was Banjas koko.

Afterwards, Shua said to Boshu: “Our cattle and wealth have gone with Banja. Go to where he is and each of you choose a place to live.”

Boshu then left with many cattle and his people and also with the Yidinit servant people. But Shua did not come – he stayed behind in Chomu.

When Boshu arrived in Dimut, he said to his brother: “Our father has sent me to you, and now you must divide the wealth . . . Choose either the ‘king cow’ (bi-de-keti), or the ‘ kingship’ of the grain with the knowledge of prayer for rain.” But Banja said: “We will live together and share both.” So they became angry and started arguing.

Finally Banja said: “Let us throw our spears to see who is the greatest.” Banja was the first to throw the spear. It travelled very far and entered deeply into the earth. Boshu’s spear, however, did not go far. When he pulled it out of the earth, it came out blade and shaft together. When Banja pulled his out, however, the shaft came out but the blade remained in the ground. Banja said: “I cannot leave this place: my spear has remained here.” This place is called Berfata.14 It is a kos, a “storehouse of the king’s things.”

Banja then gave the bi-de-keti to Boshu, and kept the ownership of the grain and the knowledge to pray for rain for himself. Boshu took the bi-de-keti and went to the banks of the Phacha River (the Omo), west of the Shorum. There he killed a cow to read the intestines to see if this was the country in which he was to settle. But the signs in the intestines read: “This country is not for you – go on further.” Boshu left there, however, a spear (Me’en: ber), a drum (kul), and a cowbell (b’elach). He also milked some milk from the bi-de-keti in a gourd, poured part of it out on the ground and left the gourd and the remainder of the milk with the other items on a mountain in the middle of a forest. This place is also called kos. Boshu’s Yidinit still live in this part of the country (beyond Jalau’s country) and are called

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3 Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front, the dominant party in Ethiopia after May 1991, when the Mengistu regime was violently ousted by them. Its Amharic/ Tigrinya acronym is EHADIG.

4 An unknown place, probably to the west, in Sudan.

5 Shua is the name of one of the most important old clans of the Me’en, with a komorut-line.

6 The sudden introduction of Koli seems out of place here.

7 Being koko in relation to a certain group means: a) belonging to a group with which marriages can be contracted; b) entertaining a relationship of “mutual assistance” with another group, relevant at certain occasions.

8 These are the Kwegu (or Koegu) people, hunter-gatherers living close to the Omo River and said to be the original inhabitants of the area before the Me’en came. Cf. the relationship of the Kwegu with the Mela (Fuku 1994).

9 These directions of the horns of this cow illustrate the mediatory role of Shua as the foremost komorut, mediator between the sky-god Tuma above and the people on earth below.

10 Impossible, because machetes (called bangà) are only a recent introduction dating from the middle of this century.

11 Tirma is the name (and area) of a Sun group, living about 20 to 25 kilometers southwest of the town of Maji, near the Sudan border.

12 Shasha is the name of a former Amhara and Italian fortified village on a mountain ridge, known to the Me’en as Gumm. It is now virtually abandoned. It overlooks the plains west and east towards the Shorum River.

13 A northern tributary of the Omo River.

14 I.e., “place where the spear was stuck.” It is in a grove in the present-day Darja k’ebele, in the southeastern Tishana area.
Tulkush Niluwa, the present Banja. She, however, is not having any children, so the title passed to his sister. Niluwa’s son Galameri died without a daughter if he has no son. In recent times, the Banja title returned to Koysha. (Shorum) valley near Ch’ebera, and six or seven years ago returned to Koysha.

Banja stayed in Dimut. He did not bring any Yidinit with him and there are none among his people to this day. He brought Koli with him (his kokó). Koli’s descendants are now very few.

Now a descendant of Banja bears his name as a title (Banja). It passes to his oldest son if he has a son; to a daughter if he has no son. In recent times, the Banja title passed to Niluwa. Niluwa’s son Galamerti died without having any children, so the title passed to his sister Tulkush Niluwa, the present Banja. She, however, is a transvestite, and will not marry and have children. But she does have the authority to pray for rain.

15 There is some confusion about the exact location of the Boshu kos. Informants told me that the Boshu’s real kos is now across the Shorum, in Banchak (or Donoua). This would match with the presence of the Yidinit (Kwegu), who were not found west of the Shorum and Omo Rivers, but only to the east, among the Bodi and Mursi.

16 There are, however, many armed conflicts on record between the Konta and the Me’en since the mid-19th century. The last big raid of Me’en (a combined Bodi – southern Tishana force) to the Konta and Kullo area dates from 1992.

17 It is not clear what is meant here: perhaps the Italians threatened to come down and subdue the Boshu or bomb their cattle because they did not submit to Italian authority. Some contemporary Me’en informants said that Boshu’s cattle was not really hurt by the Italians. The Boshu komorut at that time was a man by the name of Banajii.


19 This applies to the situation around 1968. The present-day holder (1996) of the title is a brother’s son of Niluwa, called Beyene Banja. Strangely enough, the Me’en in 1993 still talked about Tulk’ush Niluwa as living, and as being “the real Banja.” But he/she real location, status and function were shrouded in mystery. Perhaps the Me’en, by saying that Tulk’ush was a transvestite, have tried to explain the curious and unheard-of fact that the Banja, their main cattle master (komorut) of the old days, the paramount ritual Bringer of rain and fertility, was infertile: a supreme anomaly, which would have ended the line of the Banjas if not for designating a successor from a collateral line of the family.

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21 The word “king” used by several informants (also by Sere wa in his story — see note 1), is misleading, there was no “kinship” among the Me’en in the sense of sacred hereditary leadership with privileges, regalia or sacred insignia, central political power, a “court” or a retinue of servants and followers.

4. Comments

This story was told as a kind of “charter myth” of the Tishana Me’en, explaining the origin and functions of their leading “rain chiefs.” In it, several organizing themes are notable:

- sibling rivalry within the leading Me’en clan;
- migration as a response of environmental and demographic problems;
- a ritual contest between rivals;
- the dynamics of ethnic relations, reflecting hierarchy (Yidinit) and difference (Koli), but at the same time cooperation or symbiosis;
- a concern with the sources of legitimate “leadership” in the communities;
- a desire to control and bring about rain, growth, and fertility. Thus the story expresses familiar themes in Me’en life (and in African rural life in general), including a concern with continuity and reproduction.

Underlying all these themes is a historical process of long-term change in the mode of subsistence of the Me’en. The gradual transition from agro-pastoralism to more horticultural or agricultural existence was the characteristic development which has shaped their society over much of the past century, and which has — probably indeed for demographic reasons, see line 1 — led to a decisive differentiation of the Tishana from the Bodi Me’en (I.e., Mela and Chirim). Shua, Boshu, and Banja are, however, mythical names, now titles. The history of the dispersal and possibly the very emergence of the Tishana Me’en as distinct from the Mela and Chirim, is telescoped in the story of the quarrelling brothers. This telescoping is, of course, a familiar aspect of oral traditions in which generational genealogies are not strictly kept, e.g., in written form. Shua and Boshu are

Banja. The cow is slaughtered at Berfata (Banja’s kos, see above) and coffee is boiled. Bilemu and Banja plus a kokó pray together for rain. Without a kokó no ‘king’ can pray. The kokó brings the first blood from the cow in a gourd, Banja brings coffee in a gourd, and the two liquids are poured over an altar place. They pray to Tuma (God). Everyone may eat the meat, which must all be finished the same day. Remaining bones and hide are burnt on the fire.” The Bilemu title still exists. The current Bilemu, called Nebise Bilemu, is an important local community leader of the western Me’en in Gesha, an impressive man with great prestige. Both Bilemu and Banja recognise a distant genealogical (clan) relationship.
names of present-day clans of ancient origin (the "Bosh" clan also exists among the Mela, although relations are not recognized between them and the Tishana). Banja, however, is not a clan name but only the title of the line of rain chiefs within the "Chiruwa" clan (a clan of the more prestigious former Balmogut or Ngaib'ua "moieties"). In terms of the migration route allegedly followed by Banja and Boshu, it is remarkable that the account traces it through the (present-day) Suri country, west of Maji. Despite the contemporary tradition reiterated by Me’en that they came "from the Omo Valley," this route through the "Tirma country" is more likely, and may illustrate the possible links the (proto-)Me’en may have had with the (proto-)Suri (who are of the same language family, Southeastern Surmic, and have many similar cultural traits).

The story confirms also the impression gained from ethnohistorical research that the Me’en were never a purely pastoral people but always were herdsmen as well as cultivators. But we see in addition that the story reflects the migration and "division of labour" in terms of specialisation on agro-pastoralism (Boshu) and cultivation (Banja) of Me’en groups led by rain chiefs sent out by Shua, the "father," i.e., the ancestor clan, of all Tishana (cf. Abbink 1992). This group specialisation still existed in the early 1990s among the Tishana, together with a recognition by highland Me’en that the Boshu people (in the Shorum Valley) were closest to being the "real Me’en" of the past.

Interesting and slightly puzzling, however, may be the fact that Banja is presented as the senior brother, who received the knowledge of cultivation as well as the largest part of the herds. Boshu – whose more pastoral way of life reflects, one would presume, the earlier stage of subsistence of the Me’en people – comes to him to receive the herds and the bi-de-keti, instead of the other way around. Hence, the myth cannot be seen to corroborate any evolutionary stage of development of agricultural specialisation "out of" a pastoral basis: the process of change may in reality have been much more complex.

In this respect, the figure of Banja deserves more attention. There are several indications that Banja is a compound figure, and his role a reflection of the contacts of Me’en with Dizi people, who are sedentary root crop and grain cultivators in the highlands south of the Me’en area. There is a long history of contacts between the two groups: intermarriage, alliances between chiefly families, economic exchange, incorporation. Most notably, the fact that Banja, when he entered the new territory (the highland area), built a kos is very significant, because it resembles the kwoz, the "sacred place" of the Dizi chiefs (Haberland 1993: 280). Also, the description of Banja as keeping the "kingship of the grain," having the knowledge to pray for rain, and possessing chiefly paraphernalia, is reminiscent of that of a Dizi chief. The traditional Me’en komoruts cannot be considered as real chiefs (in the sense of having executive authority and rights to tribute), let alone as "kings." There is a definite possibility that the highland Me’en, when they were settling where the Banja still lives now, intermarried with the Dizi and took inspiration from the Dizi chiefly tradition. Also the present leader of the Bayti Me’en is a son of a Me’en father and a Dizi mother from the chiefly family of the Sai-kyaz chief.

5. Conclusions

The above story of the migration of leading Tishana komoruts reflects an indigenous interpretation of the gradual emergence of an horticultural-agricultural mode of subsistence by the Tishana-Me’en people alongside agro-pastoralism. It "explains," by means of a personified narrative account of a father and his two sons, the unity as well as divergence in clan dispersal, location, and mode of subsistence of the Me’en ancestors and their present-day descendants. It also accounts for the specific nature of the contacts with native groups like the Kwegu and the Dizi, with which relations of patronage and cooperation and coexistence were built. It grounds the ritual leadership of komoruts and ascribes them mediatory powers (prayer for rain and fertility) to enable the Me’en to live, herd, cultivate, and reproduce in a new area.

In the past half-century, the influence of the komoruts in Tishana society has declined and has been more and more confined to the members of their own clan and their territorial group, i.e., the immediate "followers." The very nature of their

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22 A puzzling fact is that the clan histories of "Tishana" and "Bodi" – while revealing a number of similar names – are substantially different: they cannot be "integrated" in one narrative of origins. This most likely reflects the rather diverse ethnic origins of both groups.

23 The Koli figure in the story is, however, still enigmatic. Although the story says Koli was a Tishana, there is no lineage or clan name of that kind among the Tishana. The name Koli may well stand for a Dizi group (perhaps: Kolu).
“authority” prevents them from being power-holders or major decision-makers for the Me’en community as a whole. In the revolutionary period (1974–1991), their role was ignored and bypassed, if not ridiculed and undermined. The kos of Banja was partly destroyed by political cadres, who did not understand, or had no patience with, the “ritual” (not political) role of the komorut. In the new structure of the kebele peasant associations, the latter had no function. Within this structure, new, self-made leaders emerged (although often relatives of these komoruts), addressing new concerns. The Me’en leaders recently installed by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1992) and later by the Federal Government (after 1994) are young men, educated in state schools and colleges, and have no connection with the komoruts. However, the fact that new leadership positions have emerged in the community – in the future there will probably also be those within the Christian missionary structure – does not necessarily mean that the komoruts will completely disappear.

To conclude, Me’en history has entered a new phase, which will again lead to a redefinition of oral traditions. Such a redefinition will, nevertheless, not “refute” the story presented above: seen against the information we have about Me’en history and migration, it remains a telling and ethnographically valuable reflection of an earlier phase of their history.

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L’ancêtre revenu
Croyances et pratiques autour de la naissance chez les Seereer Siin du Sénégal
Simone Kalis

Les représentations culturelles qu’une société élabore en ce qui concerne l’origine et la nature de l’enfant vont déterminer la compréhension de sa façon d’être au monde et s’articuler à la manière dont il est accueilli, materné et soigné dans le cadre de la puériculture et de la médecine traditionnelles.

Concept embryo-foetal et représentation du nouveau-né
Le nouveau-né est au croisement d’une union biologique et d’une alliance lignagère. Il comporte une part d’ancestralité. Au Sénégal, la jeune fille quitte sa famille pour rejoindre celle de son mari dans laquelle elle vivra. La résidence est de type patrilocal et le transfert de l’épouse est lié au versement par le jeune homme de la dot qui...