

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 Käfa, 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'alehiyot Church. A mission station was built in the northern Me'en area (in Tik'imt Eshet, south of Shäwa Bench town) in 1991, aimed at forming educated Christian cadre 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 Shäwa 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