The Dats'in: Historical experience and cultural identity of an undocumented indigenous group of the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland

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Abstract

The Dats'in are an indigenous minority group living on the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland. They passed unnoticed to researchers, administrators and the wider world until 2013, when the authors of this paper met them in the lowlands of Qwara (NW Ethiopia). They speak an undocumented Nilo-Saharan language, related to Gumuz, and share important cultural and social traits with other indigenous communities in the area, while at the same time remaining clearly distinct. Dats'in history, which is related to that of the so-called Hamej peoples—the blanket name by which they are known to other groups—can be traced back several centuries through oral traditions, texts and archaeology. The Hamej, in fact, played a crucial role during the Funj Sultanate (1504-1821) and probably before. The present article is based on three field seasons carried out in the lowlands of Qwara (Ethiopia), one of the areas where they live today, and intends to offer some insights into their history and culture. They exemplify well the multifaceted relations between small-scale and State societies that have characterized the last millennium in the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland.

Keywords

Ethiopia, Sudan, 'Deep rural' societies, borderlands, indigenous minorities, Nilo-Saharan languages, pre-colonial history.

Introduction

The present borderland between Sudan and Ethiopia is a complex region inhabited by several ethnic groups, mostly speakers of Nilo-Saharan languages (FIGURE 1). Many of them can be comprised under the label 'deep rural'.[1] Unlike peasant societies,[2] deep rurals have managed to avoid full incorporation into the State through its location in peripheral areas and the deployment of several mechanisms of resistance.[3] These mechanisms are very diverse and include forms of open and violent resistance, isolation, escape, refusal to engage in dominant economies and social networks, and false compliance. Resistance, however, does not preclude the assimilation of elements from neighboring State traditions. Cultural bricolage is particularly obvious among the so-called Hamej peoples,[4] a generic term that encompasses several border populations, such as the Dats'in, to which we will be referring here. Thus, deep rurals seek to

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preserve their independence 'through self-sufficiency in agricultural food production, through avoidance of getting debts to merchants', but also 'through absorbing runaways –including defeated members of the elite- from the political centers, and through appropriating some of the ritual and symbolic apparatus of the centre to work their own autonomy'.[5]

The borderland between the largely low-lying plains of Sudan and the highlands of Ethiopia have acted as a refuge for deep rural communities for many millennia[6] and consistently from the late first millennium AD onwards[7]. This is a geographically and culturally intricate area, located far from the centers of power and until very recently difficult to access: a perfect example of an 'illegible' space in James C. Scott's terms[8] and of a frontier, in Kopytoff's sense of the term: 'an area over which political control by the regional metropoles is absent or uncertain'.[9] Indeed, many of the groups living in the Ethiopian-Sudanese borderland can be defined as frontier societies in that they have a history of movement towards the periphery of the polities to which they have belonged at some point, *de iure* or *de facto*, and have taken with them elements (cultural, political, religious) that they have reworked in their new locations, where they have founded new sociopolitical units that both replicate and contest the original polity.

A combination of rugged topography, low population densities, complex history and bewildering ethnic mosaics explains that the correct identification of some groups only be ascertained in recent years,[10] the status of other communities remain unclear, and some groups are probably still unknown outside the region. The Dats'in were a good example of the latter until a few years ago. No information whatsoever existed about them until one of us (AGR) met them during a field trip to Qwara in December 2013. They turned out to be speakers of a Nilo-Saharan language strongly related to the Gumuz (although mutually unintelligible) that had not been documented hitherto.[11]

The aim of this paper is to present some general information about the Dats'in gathered during three field seasons in Qwara.[12] We have been told that other Dats'in communities live also in Inashemesh, Omedla region (Benishangul-Gumuz regional state, Ethiopia) and to the other side of the border in the Sudanese villages of Ba'asinda and Gotihayaf,[13] although Dats'in language is only spoken on the Ethiopian side. Ahland estimates that Dats'in speakers (irrespective of gender or age) may be around 1.000, but may be as few as 300-500', thus putting the language 'in danger of dying'.[14] For the time being we have not being able to access the Dats'in living in Benishangul-Gumuz and it thus is difficult to provide a good estimate of the actual number of

speakers. If we include the Dats'in who have switched to Arabic the population might be several times larger. It has to be emphasized that the Dats'in of Qwara share the land with Gumuz communities (and more recently with Amhara settlers). There seems to be a certain degree of cultural convergence with the Gumuz which may set them apart from other Dats'in elsewhere. Our work was conducted in May 2015, February 2016, February 2018 and February 2019, plus some preliminary notes gathered in December 2013. We visited all the Dats'in villages in Qwara: Lay Gïrara, Bakuja, Dängärsha, Omedla (homonym with the village in Benishagul-Gumuz), Mahadid and Beloha, all of them located on the left side of the Gelegu River (a tributary of the Dinder, which flows into the Blue Nile in Sudan) and belonging to the Mahadid *kebele*—a *kebele* is the minor administrative unit in Ethiopia. The *kebele* population comprises today mostly Dats'in, Gumuz and Amhara. The Dats'in lay largely outside state interference until 2004, when an ambitious resettlement plant brought thousands of highland peasants to the lowlands and with it the bureaucratic infrastructures of the federal state—part of the larger government's plan for effectively controlling the borderlands.[15] While Mahadid is not a Dats'in *kebele* (either juridically or demographically), the truth is that they have been gaining increasing power and visibility within it, thanks to the political dexterity of some individuals—a Dats'in had been appointed chair of the kebele during our last trips. This might help them achieve political recognition as a distinct ethnic group within the federal system at some point.

Our research has been carried out in the context of an archaeological and ethnoarchaeological project, whose priority is to understand the relationship between material culture, gender and society in the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland—a continuation of an earlier undertaking.[16] The data presented here, thus, should not be seen as part of a future ethnography on the Dats'in. The first part of the article will deal with historical issues and the second with elements of culture and identity, with a special emphasis on ritual.

Disentangling Dats'in history

There are several sources for studying the Dats'in past: archaeological, historical and ethnohistorical. They work at different time scales and with different degrees of resolution and we should not expect them to fit into a single, coherent account. According to the Dats'in's own narrative, their original homeland was in Jebel Gule, which is one of the northernmost hills rising from the Blue Nile plain south of the

Gezira, in Sudan. They left the hill during the Mahdiyya (1881-1899) escaping slavery and forced conversion. They have kept the memory of the places where they settled during their flight, a few of which can be easily identified: they include Omedla, just on the border between Sudan and Ethiopia, Abu Mendi and Dunkur, both south of the Dinder River (the present boundary between Benishangul-Gumuz and Amhara regional states in Ethiopia), and Dera Hassan and Jebel Tomat, north of that river.[17] They were living in the area now occupied by the town of Gelegu (capital of Qwara *wereda*) in 1908. Italian traveler Carlo Rossetti visited then a small Hamej village of only half a dozen houses[18]— Hamej, as we pointed out above, is a blanket term that includes the Dats'in. However, pressure from highland settlers in the 1970s forced them to follow the river Gelegu downstream (a tributary of the Dinder) to occupy their present settlements in Mahadid *kebele*, closer to the Sudanese border. During the 1970s and 1980s they suffered the ravages of the Ethiopian civil war and were recruited and attacked by the different parties involved in the conflict—the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) was active in the region at the time.

When the Dats'in arrived at the middle Gelegu valley, it was unpopulated. The Gumuz, who settled later, admit that upon their arrival they saw only Dats'in living along the river. There is both documentary and archaeological evidence supporting the view of a deserted region between the 1880s and the mid-twentieth century. The archaeological record shows a dramatic interruption during the mid-nineteenth century[19] and references from colonial officers and travelers who visited the area around 1900 note that it was virtually empty due to the slave raids of the Turco-Egyptians and their allies (Rufa'a, Shukria and Dubaina pastoralists) during the 1830s-1840s[20] and later the Mahdist raids.[21] In the 1930s, it is only the land south of the Dinder that was described as Hamej territory[22] and Ethiopian accounts register a scarcity of people that could be enslaved (*Shangalla*) in the area during the 1910s and 1920s.[23]

The story of migration from Jebel Gule to the Gelegu valley between the 1880s and the 1970s is very plausible. Jebel Gule was indeed a very important center in the area during the nineteenth century. Originally a Funj vassal chiefdom, it became a refuge for a variety of groups during the Turco-Egyptian period that were escaping the slave raids and violence that characterized the Turkiyya and later the Mahdiyya. By the beginning of the twentieth century, when the first British officers arrived in the area, only two small villages remained inhabited by people who called themselves "'Funj' and appear to be generally known as Hameg...[a]t the time of our visit in 1910 the Gule

language was disappearing rapidly; the settlement had been decimated by the Khalifa's forces [the Mahdists] and the young men and women had all been killed or taken captive, so that the population consisted of elderly men who had escaped, and having procured young wives had returned to their village. The children were growing up to speak Arabic only'.[24] From the available records, it seems that at least two different languages were spoken in Jebel Gule,[25] none of them Dats'in. This does not mean that the Dats'in were not living in Gule before, because they could have fled *en masse*. The question is, why to the distant Ethiopian foothills, which are located almost 200 km away? An answer could be that the area was actually a dependency of Jebel Gule during the Turco-Egyptian period.[26] Also, this territory is considered Hamej land, which means that the Dats'in were moving through areas occupied by either other Dats'in or people culturally related to them. In any case, that the group (as a whole or part of it) was living in Jebel Gule around the 1880s does not mean that this was their original territory. Other evidence suggests that this was not the case.

To start with, we have linguistics. The Dats'in language is related to Gumuz, whose speakers live east of Roseires and in western Ethiopia. Jebel Gule, instead, is 100 km to the west of Roseires. The languages that predominated in and around Jebel Gule belonged to the Eastern Jebel branch of Nilo-Saharan (such as Ingessana) and possibly Koman (the Gule languages)[27] which are only remotely related to Gumuz. Therefore, it seems more likely that the Dats'in were there as refugees, benefitting from the hospitality and protection of the local chief. When the situation became untenable during the Mahdiyya, they escaped to the east, that is, to their original homeland, and this area being unsafe, they marched further east. Our hypothesis is that the Dats'in originally came from the area between the Blue Nile and the Dinder. In fact, Sudanese maps from the 1940s to the present mark the eastern bank of the Nile south of Roseires as inhabited by 'Hameg'.[28] Should this be the case, then we would have a continuous territory occupied by Gumuz-speaking peoples from Roseires all the way to the escarpment of the Ethiopian plateau near Lake T'ana.

A coherent oral memory does not go beyond the 1880s among the Dats'in we had the chance to speak. If we want to go further back in time we have to rely on documentary and archaeological sources. Although the name Dats'in is not recorded anywhere, 'Hamej' is and this provides an essential clue to reconstruct their earlier history.

The term Hamej has been used historically to refer to a diversity of populations living south of Sennar and along the Ethiopian border. Their core area seems to have been located around Fazogli.[29] Groups that are regarded as Hamej may include, apart from the Dats'in themselves, the Bertha and the people of Gule, all of whom have referred to themselves as Hamej at some point.[30] The Bertha, in particular, are considered by some as the central element among the Hamej.[31] The term appeared for the first time to identify the people of the Kingdom of Alodia (or Alwa), which dominated the area between Khartoum and Sennar, from the sixth to the fifteenth century AD. The Hamej are said to have moved along the Blue Nile after the Funj conquest of Alodia in 1504 and founded a new polity with its capital in Fazogli or in Roseires,[32] an account that coincides with the oral history of the Bertha.[33] The collective memory of the original capital would have remained in the names of archaeological sites, known as 'Soba' still during colonial times around Roseires,[34] and the existence of sacred rocks with the same denomination in Gule, Sillok and other hills of the region.[35] Apart from Fazogli/Roseires, other places became the seat of noble Hamej, such as Jebel Gule, whose chief considered himself a descendant of the Hamej, not the Funj.[36]

Fazogli was eventually captured around 1685,[37] but the Hamej enjoyed considerable autonomy within the Sultanate: they were described as a medley of groups, some ruled by chiefs, others by kings, some paying tributes to Ethiopia, others to Sennar, and all 'sun-worshipping pagans'.[38] During the last third of the eighteenth century they challenged the central authority and Hamej regents ruled the sultanate.[39] Their powerful cavalry was feared by neighboring groups.

The term Hamej is, in turn, related to Anej (Aneg, Anag), which is widespread in northern and central Sudan to refer to groups that were considered aboriginal.[40] They are seen as giant people and heralds of civilization, whose presence is manifested in archaeological ruins. The Dats'in informants distinguish between the Hamej, with whom they relate, and the Anej, whom they regarded as the ancient settlers of the country, a race of giants associated with the archaeological remains of the area. This is different from the people of Gule, who do not seem to establish a distinction between the two terms and refer to themselves as Anej. Indeed, Anej and Hamej are in all likelihood one and the same.[41] Oral traditions about the Funj often mix both:[42] the Anej, according to one story, would have been defeated by the Funj and escaped upstream the Blue Nile, first to Sennar and then to Jebel Tornasi, further to the south.[43] The story coincides with the Hamej and probably refers to the same group and historical event. It

is possible that Hamej is just an interpretation of Anej, since *hamäj* is a word taken to mean 'ignorant' among Arabic speaking communities.[44]

To sum up: Hamej/Anej are a variety of ethnic groups which formed part of the Christian Kingdom of Alodia and emigrated during the time of turmoil preceding and succeeding the Funj conquest of the kingdom (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries). They were not an ethnic identity, but one that mixed political, religious and cultural elements and as such could be adopted by other communities. We can hypothesize that people escaping from the Alodian core settled around Fazogli, where they established a new kingdom[45] and mixed with the local populations, which were the ancestors of the Bertha, Dats'in, Gumuz and other groups, all whom ended up adopting the Hamej identity, which was seen as prestigious—as the later Funj one. Fragments of that old identity survived until well into the twentieth century in the form of rituals, names, artifacts and fragments of memory.

Funj and Hamej were also strongly related. Spaulding[46] and Delmet[47] consider that these terms refer to the same peoples, the difference between both being their relation to power. Thus, the Funj were the founders of the Sennar kingdom[48] and represented the aristocracy of the Sultanate, whereas the term Hamej was used to describe the local populations, associated with the vanquished Kingdom of Alodia (and later Fazogli). Funj aristocracy soon resorted to Islam and an Islamic genealogy to legitimize their superiority,[49] whereas the Hamej would have remained non-Islamic or only partially Islamized until very late.[50] Yet this does not mean that they always retained a subaltern position: from 1762 onwards, Funj rule over the Kingdom of Sennar was overthrown and replaced by the 'Hamej regency', which lasted until the Turco-Egyptian conquest of 1821.[51] The distinction between Funj and Hamej, then, would have been the result of a 'historical process that would have provoked a sociological distinction, later transcribed in ethnic terms'.[52] Wendy James has coined the apt term 'Funj mystique' to refer to the widespread persistence of a Funj memory among the borderland communities.[53] We could likewise talk of a more faded Hamej mystique, some of whose cultural practices could still be recorded during the twentieth century.[54] The persistence of such mystique, Funj or Hamej, has much to do with its material dimension, to which we have access through archaeology.

Regarding archaeological data, the survey of the Qwara lowlands has allowed us to produce an archaeological sequence going from the late first millennium AD to the present.[55] Archaeology shows that around 1600 the region between Rahad and Dinder

was completely empty. A century later, it became suddenly and densely occupied by people coming from Sudan. The material culture of the period, which is characterized by diagnostic decorated pottery, smoking pipes, glass beads and incense-burners, is identical through all the area historically occupied by people labelled as Hamej/Funj, from Sennar to the Ethiopian escarpment. We believe that the presence of this cultural assemblage in the Gelegu valley is due to the arrival of people migrating from Fazogli in 1685 or later after the kingdom was annexed by the Funj and an epidemic of smallpox ravaged central Sudan, leading to widespread population movements.[56] The Hamej that occupied the Gelegu valley during the late seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries were in all probability related to the Dats'in, but we cannot tell whether they were their direct ancestors, another of the ethnic communities that have traditionally lived in the wider area, or one that was annihilated during the turbulent nineteenth century. What archaeology proves is that there is cultural substance to the label 'Hamej'.

Culture and identity

The Dats'in today have a patrilineal kinship system and are organized in clans. These clans are usually identified by the prefix *da-* at the beginning. Of the 11 clans that were given to us, seven have the prefix (Darecho, Dakadhe, Damdreg, Da'indil, Da'mikä'e-anz, Däk'urf, Dädähar), two others start by *ja-* (Jago'echä, Jädabe), which is probably just a variety of *da-*, one is a place name (Jebel Gär) and the last one may have a prefix *fa-* (Foconti). Da- is the clan indicator for the Gumuz, whereas fa- is the clan prefix used by the Bertha. The name Dats'in was perhaps originally a clan denomination, which ended up referring to the entire group.

The Dats'in reside in small clusters of compounds—rather than nucleated villages—that are established on silt bars along the Gelegu river and surrounded by cultivated fields. This is a settlement pattern that has been documented archaeologically since the late seventeenth century in the area.[57] These clusters have between six and 15 houses, including both proper houses (that is, a hut occupied by a couple and their younger children or by an adult who has been married at some point) and those built by male teenagers (called *duchäqo*) in front of the main hut. Each house (*chäqo*) has its own granary, a drying platform and a raised goat house. The houses are circular and have a diameter of six to eight meters, without internal divisions or external fences that

delimit the compound.[58] This is similar to the domestic architecture of their Gumuz neighbors and the lowland Bertha living further south.

Dats'in society—like all other indigenous communities in the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland—is predicated on male egalitarianism. Such egalitarianism is played out in different ways, such as working parties, restrictions in wealth accumulation and a particular form of dance—known in other neighboring groups[59]—in which participants form a circle embracing each other tightly at the shoulder. This is a powerful bodily metaphor that celebrates group belonging and their mutual defense against the external world. Despite prevailing male egalitarianism, ritual figures of authority are respected. There are also chiefs (*tïs*) who are elected by a male assembly to mediate in internal conflict. It is somebody well respected within the community and that had to take an oath, in which he promises to obey God and the community. Although the position is for life, he can be replaced by the assembly if he fails to fulfill his role properly.

There are, at any rate, some indications of growing economic inequalities among households, which are manifested in the different number of women that a man can marry, the amount of cattle and the variety and richness of female adornments, which are brought from Sudan by their husbands. Indeed, some Dats'in men travel seasonally to the neighboring country to engage in wage labor, a fact that can in the mid-term increase wealth differences. Nevertheless, seasonal salaried work by the Gumuz in Sudan for over a century has not yet led to greater social inequality.[60] Other groups, instead, directly ban labor for money, as the Uduk did at least until the 1980s.[61] Also, laboring for wages abroad does not mean that this is an accepted behavior in their own territory. Gumuz, Bertha or Dats'in do not accept salaried work in their homeland. The maintenance of relations of equality among households—which means only among men[62]—has been a key strategy of resistance against external domination.

The Dats'in practice a conservative slash-and-burn agriculture that overall resists technological innovation and the introduction of the plow. The main tools are the hoe (*teb)* and digging stick (*antil*), which they use to cultivate sorghum (*konĉ*), corn (*buturk/rifa*), such oil seeds as noog (*buluz*) and sesame (*käf*). They also grow pumpkin (*mänxe*) and *inqäse*—a tuber that resembles a carrot—and exploit wild plants like the y*aĉa* (Amharic- s*ensa*), two other potato-like bulbs—s*ät* (Am.*ĉole*), *endole* (Am. *embaqo*)—and the onion-like-*moyer*. As a complement to the basically vegetable diet, they raise some animals, predominately goats (*me'e*), followed by sheep (*jaj*), a few

hens (*me'te*) and some cattle (*ruus*). Agriculture and husbandry are mostly male tasks (it is young boys who look after the goats), although women assist men in practices such as weeding, and are fully in charge of transporting harvested sorghum from the cultivation fields to a threshing area near the compounds—as it happens among other groups of the Ethiopian-Sudanese borderland, like the Maban[63] and the Gumuz.[64] They also thresh, store grain and grind it. Besides, widowed or abandoned women can cultivate on their own sorghum, peanut, corn and legumes, as well as some cotton to make strings for their necklaces. They can also organize communal works (*imphänts'h*) to speed up the process of harvesting. Widows and divorced women can raise animals: when there are no boys to look after the goats, it is young girls who carry out this task. Other female activities include fetching wood, making pottery, weaving mats (*njerke*) for the beds (Sudanese-style *anqareb*) made by their husbands, carrying water, gathering wild plants, cooking porridge (*ga*), preparing beer (*käya*) and looking after their husbands when they arrive tired from agricultural work. This means that, as in the majority of African societies, they work more than men and unlike men's work, which is characterized by bouts of intense activity and long periods of inactivity, women's work is continuous and, for that reason, more demanding.

In fact, women's hard labor is considered an important criterion to define femaleness and marriageablity, along with their cooking skills and the care they take in looking beautiful and well-groomed. This they achieve by decorating their necks, wrists, ankles and heads with beads and cowries, an activity to which they devote considerable time (see below). Like other women in the region they transport heavy loads using a carrying stick (*figwaai*) that is balanced on a shoulder. From each extreme of the stick hang nets where they place the load: jerry cans with water, baskets full of sorghum, charcoal or wood. The same system is attested among other neighboring groups often grouped as Hamej, but also another indigenous group that lives far away, on the Eritrean borderland, the Kunama.[65]

Although of limited economic relevance at the moment, hunting still has a relevant symbolic role among the Dats'in. There is an interesting split here between reality and the imaginary. While small mammals are still hunted for consumption,[66] no lion or elephant hunt has been organized for years, because it is forbidden—the Dats'in live near Alatish National Park, which is heavily policed by rangers. However, like other neighboring groups, the Dats'in keep a strong collective memory of hunting which conveys well the outstanding relevance that this activity, which was practiced

communally, had for men. Like other groups in the region, the Dats'in perceive themselves as continuously threatened by human and non-human forces, be they diseases or evil spirits. Thus, Wendy James noted among the Uduk that 'even when involved in weeding a field, they see themselves as combating the invasive forces of the wild, and employ a range of devices, practices and rituals to keep away the wild birds, insects and so forth, which threaten the crops'.[67] Likewise, the Dats'in see illness as evidence of the destructive energies unceasingly harassing them. Yet it is women now who are in charge of fighting these menacing agents, as we will see below.

Although the Dats'in combine Islamic elements with their traditional religion, the former are still in the minority. Although some are fluent in Arabic, they do not use it among them; there are no Dats'in mosques as such (although they might use others'), and they do not celebrate Islamic weddings. Islamic influence is better seen in funerary rituals. Yet it is spirits, rather than God, that governs the supernatural world: *Qumsinjil*—the guardian spirit, which resides in the house (*chäqo*) and granary (*dhib*)—and two evil beings: *Muse'h*—who lives in the rivers (*elä'e*) and the caves (*hu'a*)—and *Hoo,* who struggles with *Qumsinjil* for domination of the domestic space. *Hoo* takes the shape of a cobra: if one enters a house, it has to be demolished and the family has to move elsewhere. Interestingly, the main protective spirits (of the house, sorghum, rain, trees and so forth) among the Gumuz are called *Mus'a,*[68] whose name is probably derived from the Islamic term for Moses. However, the Dats'in reverse the protective character of the spirit and transform it in a threatening agent. This shows that, as with the Uduk, 'their apparently easy acceptance of (the) new 'Gods' and enthusiasm for new religious practices is always deceptive'.[69]

This same ambivalence can be observed in other aspects of supernatural belief. Thus, they can visit a Muslim ritual specialist *(faqi/fuqara),* who prepares Quranic amulets and uses the Quran for healing, but this does not prevent them from resorting to the services of traditional healers, as is the case with many other African Muslim societies. In fact, the *faqi* we met was married to a traditional healer (*fiyi*). Depending on the nature of the problem, the Dats'in seek the assistance of a *faqui*, a *fiyi* or a *gohe*. The *fiyi* assists in specific physical problems, whereas the *gohe* deals with good and evil spirits. In theory, both men and women can have these positions. However, all active traditional specialists at the time of our fieldwork were women. Thus, out of six *gohe* documented in the villages of Dängärsha, Omedla and Mähadid, four were active women and two inactive men. Dreaming, as we will see, is the essential healing method

in the *gohe*'s toolkit. The last two male *gohe*s who are still remembered died 10 and 15 years ago respectively, which is perhaps telling of gender-related transformations, perhaps linked to the matrifocal background of the Dats'in.

The *fiyi* works with plants and deals with physical ailments, such as abscesses, throat pain, hemorrhoids, vaginal infections, etc., although it can also help with illnesses associated to the anxiety provoked among women by separation from their families after marriage or by men's travels. That is, what Western society would define as psychological stress.[70]The two main motives for visiting the *fiyi* are stomach problems and headaches, followed by eye infections. The specialist is paid with a hen or other commensurate goods. Unlike the Bertha, for whom the stomach plays a role similar to the heart or brain in Western culture,[71] or the Uduk, for whom it represents 'the reflexive and deliberate will' and the liver the force and spirit of a person,[72] for the Dats'in the heart is where thoughts (*quy'iz*), emotions (*mägärqua)* and happiness (*mängäro*) dwell, while anger (*zähay*) can be located either in the heart (according to women) or the liver (*indihi*) (according to men).The *fiyi* has a Gumuz counterpart and it is possible that this position has been adopted from them: it is the *ette biye*, which means 'master of the root'. The *ette biye* heals similar illnesses and pains as the *fiyi* also using plants.[73]

The *gohe*, instead, is related to spirits. She can foresee the future and carry out propitiatory rituals (*ke-laad*), asking *Qumsinjil* to give a good harvest to the community, or confronting *Muse'h* and *Hoo*, when they enter human bodies or houses making them ill. In this case they fulfill the same roles as the Gumuz *gafea* or *gwahea*, which whom they are related. As a matter of fact, the Dats'in do not hesitate to ask for the services of a Gumuz *gafea*, if their own *gohes* do not achieve the expected results. Like the *gafea*, the *gohe* practice divination on the basis of dreams: it is in dreams where they see the spirits causing a disease and discover the method to fight them. And as among Gumuz *gafea*, there is a hierarchy of *gohe*, depending on the fame of their results.

Healing rites are perceived and performed, in most cases, as an act of hunting or war against the spirits that have invaded bodies and houses. Confronting evil spirits—hunting or fighting them—implies lethal risks,[74] thus the *gohe* resorts to war or hunting tools: the whip (*algälänchil*) and spears (*inkase-gohe*), which are objects still discursively associated with men (FIGURE 2). They use one or two spears depending of the gravity of the situation, and also a scepter or staff (*engo-gohe*). The staff is made of bamboo by the *gohe*'s assistant (*mete-gohe*). It is a symbol of the *gohe*'s power, a ritual

aid and a protective device: she always takes it with her when she is travelling and sleeps with it near her head to help her dream. During healing rituals, she sticks it in the ground alongside the spears. Finally, she defends herself with the whip (*algälänchil*), which she holds under her armpit during the healing rite and which accompanies her in her travels to other villages. The whip is used also to halt and chase the whirlwind that is produced whenever *Muse'h* abandons the body of a patient. The *gohe* may use the blood from a goat to establish contact with Qumsinjil, the guardian spirit, and she accompanies the act of smearing the blood with a prayer addressed to the spirit. It is believed that Qumsinjil has antelope or goat horns.[75] Interestingly, we were able to witness the healing of a baby in Beloha in which the *gohe* did not use spears but a stick topped with a horned animal head (FIGURE 3). Here again we see the inversion of a ritual present in a neighboring society: the Bertha ritual specialist, the *neri,* cuts the ear of a goat, but in this case to attract and capture an evil spirit that is damaging a house. After cutting it and throwing it on the floor, they wiped it out and the evil with it.[76] As among other indigenous communities of the borderland, propitiatory offerings of chicken and beer (*käya*) are made to the spirits.[77]

Whip and scepter are crucial objects from a symbolic point of view. They manifest the category and hierarchy of the *gohe* and are an example of elements adopted from the traditional appurtenances of the neighboring states. However, they have been recontextualized: the objects still convey authority, but one that is ritual, not political. It is used to rule over spirits, not over other human beings. The *gohes* who enjoy a greater reputation sit on an elevated chair in the presence of other *gohes* (another element taken from state traditions) and they lead the group when they travel to attend a big ceremony. Their greater category is expressed in the material in which the whip is made. Unlike ordinary *gohe*, which use whips made in common leather, the paramount *gohe* employs tools made of hippopotamus skin, which is brought by their assistants (*mete-gohe*) from the town of Al-Qadarif in Sudan. Meaningfully, Evans-Pritchard[78] saw that different communities of the southern Dar Funj, not far from the Dats'in lands, used hippo whips in marriage feasts, in which young men used to flog each other (but not the bridegroom). The anthropologist considered that the whip was adopted from the Arabs. In fact, the whip is an element strongly associated to pastoralists and alien in a culture that virtually lacks cattle or camels. The recontextualization of these artefacts to which we have referred is particularly thorough in that it does not only affect relations between humans and non-humans (spirits or animals), but also gender relations. The whip as a

symbol of masculinity is subverted among the Datsín, since it is only women who use it in ritual contexts.

The *gohe* has the gift of being able to contact spirits, but this is a dangerous activity. She can be attacked by *Muse'h* and *Hoo*, who are lodged in the ill person's body. The risks entailed by her job explain that the ritual specialist is supported by an assistant, who always belongs to the *gohe*'s clan. His name, *mete-gohe*, literally '*gohe's*-chicken', refers to his inferior status as a servant. His prestige always depends on that of the *gohe* whom he serves. This is again a reversal of the dominant discourse, in relation to gender and age. The *mete-gohe* is not only a man, but also, in the four active cases in the area, he is older than the *gohe*, who is a female. Only the *gohe* from Omedla, Ignitera, has two *mete-gohe*, one male and another female. The female serves the *gohe* only in the absence of the male, although she plays a relevant role during the *gohe* rituals when the male assistant is traveling far away.

As we said before, some Islamic features are present in Dats'in culture. Islam is a religion associated with external authority that allows the Dats'in to feel empowered. However, this is a religion that follows a patriarchal logic: only men (*sheikh* and *faki/fuqara*) can achieve positions of ritual prominence and women are subjected through new ritual practices, such as clitoridectomy—although it cannot be said whether this is an Islamic imposition or was practiced before. In turn, in the field of traditional religious activities, which is far from dwindling, the logic of power related to gender and age is inverted and it is young women who have authority over male elders. This is a fact that is not incorporated into explicit discourse but is obviously played out in practice.

This inversion of gender roles may be associated with the matrifocal elements that were present among the Hamej and Funj, which provide the symbolic reservoir for gender resistance.[79] There are several reminiscences of such matrifocality.[80] At present, the Dats'in practice marriage through bride wealth—the groom has to give the male members of the girl's family an ox and four goats[81]—and postmarital residence is virilocal. However, temporary uxorilocal residence was the norm until recently: the newly-married couple spends between a week and a month in the village of the girl's parents.[82] Older women assert that they spent an entire year after marriage in their family's compound, with the husbands working for their wives' parents, before moving to their husbands' village. This obligation is (or was until very recently) fully enforced by the Bertha, some of whom said that uxorilocal residence did not end until the new

couple gives birth to a child[83] and the Ingessana.[84] Interestingly, they have both been categorized as 'Hamej' at some point in their history. This can be related to a matrifocal, even perhaps matrilineal tradition, that has also been pointed out among the Funj royalty. Royal rights were inherited via the maternal line at least until 1600[85] and the throne usually passed from one brother to the other. In the case of the Dats'in, matrilineal elements also include the relevance of the mother's brother, who assumes all responsibility for his sister and her sons when the husband dies or divorces. There are traces of mother-in-law avoidance among men as well, a custom that has been noted among other Hamej or Hamej-related groups, such as Ingessana, Sillok and Bertha.[86]

Today, these matrifocal elements are fading, as seen in the short time accorded to post-marital residence in the village of the bride's parents. During the first week, the couple is expected to spend seven days in total seclusion, during which the wife could only go out with the head covered with a veil and on the shoulders of the husband's relatives if she needs to go to the bathroom (the youngest wives speak only of being accompanied by her husband's female relatives). This seclusion (particularly of the new wife) may be spent in an independent house (made *ad hoc*) or in some villages as Mahadid, in a specific part of the hut of the husband's parents, which is separated from the rest of the house with the bride's Islamic veil (*t'ära*). Nobody can interact with her, except small children, who are her only entertainment those days. After the period of seclusion, the married couple will occupy their final residence, which is a round house without internal partitions or a central pillar.

However, if there is something that immediately identifies the Dats'in as a group, it is female decoration. Indeed, the woman's body is inseparable from the colorful beads that decorate it, as happens among other African groups.[87] There is a long-term trend in the region of lavishly decorated female bodies going back to the Early Holocene: necklaces, pendants and piercings are very numerous in Mesolithic and Neolithic burials[88] and bead aprons have been excavated in graves dating to the first millennium AD.[89] In our surveys, the earliest beads were found in a 13th-century site located near the Dats'in village of Gïrara, but they become overabundant during the Funj period (17th-18th c.).[90] Today, the 'image of the body'[91] of Dats'in women is still indissolubly linked to beads, which doubtless are a 'core object', that is, 'an artefact which, by its usages and ritual connectedness, appears to be vital for the definition of a culture'.[92]

At the time of birth, all babies, male and female, are covered with beads so as to protect them against evil eye. However, it is only women who, during the rest of their lives, will keep an 'image of the body' associated with beads. In fact, not even in death will they be able to do without them. Although the greater part is inherited by their daughters, every woman must keep at least two strings of beads on the neck because otherwise 'God will not allow them to enter Paradise'.[93] Beads are used to decorate the neck (*mändiphi*), wrists (*mandite'e*), ankles (*mändichowg*), upper arms (*mandi'ee*), waist, and particularly, the head (*mändiqo*). The degree of decoration varies from one place to the other. At present, the women of Omedla are those who decorate themselves more, followed by those of Dängärsha and Lay-Gïrara. The technique is similar, but the designs are personalized. They devote an enormous amount of time, effort and care to decorate their heads. Although older women make headdresses at times, young women prefer to make them among themselves. They may spend an entire day finishing an elaborate hairdo and in general it takes several hours (FIGURE 4). They do veritable crochet works (they actually employ a crochet hook), weaving together hair and cotton thread. The latter they cultivate and spin themselves—a practice that we have attested archaeologically at least from the late first millennium AD: spindle whorls are plentiful in the Gelegu valley.[94] Cotton threads are strung with diverse objects: beads, buttons, cowries and cotton adornments that their husbands or brothers purchase for them in their travels to work in Sudan. Women are considered more attractive the more their heads are decorated. Consequently, the maximum intensity of decoration occurs during the teenage years, between 14 and 20 years of age (FIGURE 5), although girls begin wearing single strings of beads (known as *mändiphi*) at the age of 8 or 9. For that same reason, women stop decorating their heads when they are around 40. The headdress is then replaced by a single broad and colorful strip, whose extremes usually hang on the back or shoulders. Beads have strong implications as part of the technologies of the feminine self and therefore in the construction of gender identity,[95] issues with which we will deal elsewhere.

Although we will not talk about it here, it is important to note that the Dats'in, as has been pointed out, is a patriarchal society, even if social and economic equality among men may give the impression of an 'egalitarian society' sustained by an 'egalitarian ethics', as Gumuz society has been defined, for instance.[96] Women occupy a subordinate position, as evinced by such practices as clitoridectomy. The ablation of the clitoris is carried out on every girl at that is 7 or 8 years old, as a condition to be

accepted in society. Genital mutilation is followed by a period of seclusion, which is spent in a separate hut (*chiqumish*), where only elderly men and women who have no sexual relations can enter. According to other reports,[97] seclusion takes places inside the main house, where the girl will pass up to 40 days lying or sitting with open legs so that wound can heal. Gumuz boys are circumcised at the age of 6 or 7. Circumcision is practiced by an expert (*itimish*) and also requires two weeks of seclusion. The Dats'in equate both rites, which are celebrated in a small feast attended by the immediate neighbors in the residential hut, where they slaughter either a goat or a chicken and drink beer. Such symbolic levelling, however, obscures, the real asymmetry inherent to both practices—one essentially violent and crippling—and helps reinforce gender hierarchies.

Conclusions

The Dats'in, like other 'deep rural' societies in the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland, have been evolving as a culture that has managed to deal with the tensions intrinsic to active resistance to external domination. At heart, there is an unavoidable contradiction, stemming, on the one hand, from their alliance with certain forms of power that have allowed them to create resilience,[98] and, on the other, from their preservation of traditions and beliefs that have guaranteed their cultural and social autonomy.[99]

Thus, like other Hamej groups, they learnt to combine their cultural and political alliances with the Funj elite first, Islam later and now the Ethiopian state to achieve an autonomous existence that has lasted centuries. The result is a rich and complex culture in which discourses of truth associated with power coexist with everyday practical actions defined by the inversion of those power relations that are made explicit through discourse. In this context, social representations are often contradicted by actual practice, whose deep rationale is left unexplained by public discourse. Thus, the Dats'in are nominally Muslim, but their main threats come from spirits that have to be fought through traditional experts. They are patriarchal and have traditionally associated masculinity with war and hunting, yet it is women today who face the most powerful dangers and those who know how to fight them using the weapons of war and hunting. Although women carry out most tasks in society, it is male labor in agriculture (cultivating the fields) that gets more recognition.

At the time of our fieldwork, schools and literacy are appearing in the area.[100] This will have unpredictable effects on Dats'in culture. For the moment, the number of

Dats'in attending school is minimal—mostly boys. This will probably lead to a radicalization of gender differences and a decrease in social resistance, as people enter the rationality of the State. This, however, has not yet happened and it will be interesting to see the paths followed by the Dats'in in their future cultural survival.

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[1] Jedrej, *Ingessana*.

[2] Wolf, *Peasants*.

[3] Jedrej, *Ingessana*; Jedrej, 'Where Nuba and Hajeray'; González-Ruibal, *An Archaeology of Resistance*; James, 'Charles Jedrej'.

[4] Cerulli, *Peoples of South-west Ethiopia*, 14.

[5] James, 'Charles Jedrej', 3.

[6] Fernández, 'Four thousand years'.

[7] González-Ruibal and Falquina, 'Sudan's Eastern borderland'.

[8] Scott, *Seeing like a state*.

[9] Kopytoff, 'Frontiers and frontier societies', 170; see also Korf, Hagmann and Doevenspeck, 'Geographies of Violence and Sovereignity', 29.

[10] González-Ruibal, *An Archaeology of Resistance*.

[11] Ahland, 'Daats'iin, a new identified'.

[12] Hernando, 'Cuerpo, cultura material y género'.

[13] Ahland, 'Daats'iin, a new identified', 418.

[14] Ibid., 417.

[15] Markakis, *Ethiopia.*

[16] González-Ruibal, *An Archaeology of Resistance*.

[17] The complete list includes the following place names: Berbet, Bangwo, Bilbit, AbuMendi, Pink'uliki, Yetet'ea, Bendwaji, Madar, Dunkur, Tomat, Gimb, Derahassan and Madis.

[18] Rossetti, 'Una punta in Etiopia', 967.

[19] González-Ruibal and Falquina, 'In Sudan's Eastern borderland', 196-197.

[20] Rossetti, 'Una punta in Etiopia', 968.

[21] Gwynn, 'Surveys on the Sudan-Abyssian Frontier', 573.

[22] *Guida dell'Africa Oriental*, 365.

[23] James, *'Kwanim Pa*, 41, 44; James, 'Lifelines', 120.

[24] Seligman and Seligman, *The pagan tribes*, 416-418; see also James, 'The Funj mystique'.

[25] Seligman, 'Note on two languages'.

[26] Endalew, *Inter-ethnic relations*, 54.

[27] Seligman, 'Note on two languages'.

[28] Cerulli, *Peoples of South-west Ethiopia*, 14; Bashir, Mohamed and Abdalah, 'Rosieres Dam', fig. 1.

[29] Spaulding, 'The Fate of Alodia'.

[30] Bender, *Peoples and Cultures*, 13, 183.

[31] Evans-Pritchard, 'Ethnological observations', 42; Triulzi, *Salt, Gold, and Legitimacy*, 66.

[32] Spaulding, 'The Fate of Alodia'.

[33] Triulzi, *Salt, Gold and Legitimacy*, 60.

[34] Chataway, 'History of the Funj', 248.

[35] Delmet, 'Populations du Djebel Guli'.

[36] Holt, 'Fung origins', 45.

[37] Triulzi, *Salt, Gold and Legimacy*, 62.

[38] Ibid., 63.

[39] Robinson, 'Abu El Kaylik', 235-236.

[40] Newbold, 'Anag at Gebel Haraza', 127-128; Newbold, 'The White Nuba', 35-37; Hawley, 'Zanneia', 137.

[41]Delmet, 'Populations du Djebel Guili, 133; Delmet, 'Islamisation et matrilinéarité', 47.

[42] Crawford, *Funj Kingdom of Sennar*, 145.

[43] Chataway, 'History of the Funj', 257.

[44] "Hameg, a name used by the Hadendoa to denote an ignorant people, in other words, those who are still in the dark pre-Islamic days" (Jackson, *Osman Digna*, p. 54).

[45] Spaulding, 'The fate of Alodia'.

[46] Ibid., 27.

[47] Delmet, 'Populations du Djebel Guli', 133.

[48] Delmet, *Histoire, peuplement et culture*, 529.

[49] Delmet, 'Islamisation et matrilinéarité', 39.

[50] Delmet, 'Populations du Djebel Guli, 121.

[51] O'Fahey and Spaulding, *Kingdoms of the Sudan*, 94-95.

[52] Delmet, 'Populations of Djebel Guli, 133.

[53] James, 'The Funj mystique'.

[54] Delmet, 'Populations du Djebel Guli', Chataway, 'History of the Funj'.

[55] González-Ruibal and Falquina, 'Sudan's Eastern borderland'.

[56] Ibid., 195.

[57] Ibid., fig.18.

[58] Falquina, 'Arquitecturas salvajes'.

[59] James, 'Reforming the circle'.

[60] Wallark, 'The Bega of Wellega'; Feyissa Dadi, *Los Gumuz de Etiopía occidental*, 397; González-Ruibal, *An Archaeology of Resistance*, 329.

[61] James, *The Listening Ebony*, 22.

[62] Hernando, 'Cuerpo, cultura material y género'.

[63] Wedderburn-Maxwell, 'The Maban of the Southern Fung', 181.

[64] Feyissa Dadi, *Los Gumuz de Etiopía Occidental*, 268.

[65] Rossetti, 'Una punta', 969.

[66] Habtamu and Bekele, 'Habitat association'.

[67] James, *The Listening Ebony*, 41.

[68] Feyissa Dadi, *Los Gumuz de Etiopía Occidental*, 209.

[69] James, *The Listening Ebony*, 339.

[70] Informant: Halima Mohamed, *fiyi* from Omedla.

[71] González-Ruibal, 'Order in a disordered world', 393.

[72] James, *The Listening Ebony*, 7.

[73] Wolde-Selassie, *Gumuz and highland resettlers*.

[74] Viveiros de Castro, 'Os pronomes cosmológicos', 135.

[75] Informant: Osman Sebiyte, from Babuja.

[76] González Ruibal, 'Order in a disordered world', 398.

[77] Jedrej, *Ingessana*, 78; James, *The Listening Ebony*, 84-5; 358-9.

[78] Evans-Pritchard, 'Ethnological observations', 6.

[79] Delmet, 'Islamisation et matrilinéarité'; Evans-Pritchard, 'Ethnological observations'.

[80] James, 'Matrifocus on African women'.

[81] Informants: Habiba Asalu, from Dängärsha and Mustafá Argo, from Mahadid.

[82] Informants: Bayita from Beloha and Zehara from Dängärsha, women in their twenties.

[83] González Ruibal, 'Order in a disordered world, 391.

[84] Jedrej, *Ingessana*, 22, 27.

[85] Spaulding, 'Incident of Dynastic Succession', 26.

[86] Evans-Pritchard, 'Ethnological observations', 6; Grottanelli, "I Pre-Niloti", 309.

[87] Kleppe, 'Religion expressed through bead'; Labelle, *Beads of Life*.

[88] Honegger, 'Settlement and cemeteries'.

[89] Bashir, Mohamed and Abdalah, 'Rosieres Dam', pl. 17.

[90] Chataway, 'History of the Funj', figs. 5-6; González-Ruibal and Falquina, 'In Sudan's eastern borderland, fig. 24.

[91] Schilder, *The Image and Appareance*.

[92] Boesch, *Symblic Action Theory*, 333.

[93] Informants: Kaltuma, from Beloha, and Zehara, from Dängärsha

[94] González-Ruibal and Falquina, 'In Sudan's Eastern borderland', fig. 9.

[95] Marcoux, 'Body exhanges'.

[96] James 1979, *'Kwanim Pa*, 19; Feyissa Dadi, *Los Gumuz de Etiopía occidental*, 266.

[97] Informants: Amuna Shikkiden from Omedla and Zehara from Dängärsha.

[98] Cyrulnik, *Resilience*.

[99] Jedrej, 'Were Nuba and Hadjeray', 209.

[100] Zeleke, 'Gumuz children's school participation'.

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