

# Religious and Mystical Beliefs and Health Practices among the Raya Community in Southern Tigray, Ethiopia

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**Abstract:** *The objective of this study was to explore the relationship between religious and mystical beliefs and health practices in the Raya community of southern Tigray. In particular, this research identified religious and other beliefs in supernatural powers and described how these beliefs explain the causation, prevention, and treatment of sickness in the study community. Primary data were collected through key informant interviews and case studies. Based on this data, the study found that the community holds numerous beliefs related to beings with supernatural powers and other elements rooted in mysticism. The study community holds that if people disrespect supernatural beings and individuals with supernatural powers, disobey them, or engage in any other behaviour that is considered inappropriate or hostile, it can bring about misfortune, including health disorders. The entities that are possessed with the supernatural powers use these powers to hurt people's health—both voluntarily and at the behest of other people. These beliefs provide sickness aetiologies and influence the health seeking behaviour of community members, as well as their preventative behaviour and choice of therapeutic options. The religious and mystical rituals of the Raya community and their impact on health practices are suggested for further study.*

**Key words:** Religious beliefs, health practices, Raya community, southern Tigray

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## INTRODUCTION

All religions make a set of assertions about 'supernatural' beings and how they interact with physical, social, and cultural spheres (Eller, 2007). Religions also have beliefs about the kinds of things (beings, spirits, supernatural powers) that exist in the world, what they like, and what they

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have done and are capable of doing (Henninger-Rener, 2020). In addition, some religions incorporate one or more forces or impersonal energies or laws that govern the universe (Eller, 2007).

In religion, supernatural beings are often embodied in spirits, divinities, or forces that are not subject to the rules of nature (Henninger-Rener, 2020). In this regard, religious beliefs are beliefs around gods and other religious things or events (Coleman *et al.*, 2018). Belief in the paranormal, a realm beyond the control of human experience, is one of the characteristics of religion (Henninger-Rener, 2020), and such beliefs can also govern people's actions (Lan, 2018).

Native African religions are an integral component of African culture (Ndemanu, 2018). Traditional African faiths are thought to have existed since the dawn of civilization (*ibid*). Despite the fact that African ethnic groups frequently share ancestry, each community has its own unique religious rituals and beliefs (Nyangweso, 2015). Despite centuries of Christian and Islamic rule and teachings, indigenous African faiths continue to be practised in most African countries (Pew Research Center, 2010). For instance, Barrett claims that there are over 750 distinct peoples in sub-Saharan Africa, each practising a different belief system (cited in Ferdinando, 1995). The idea that all elements and things—including people, spirits, and animals—engage in the cosmos' complex interplay of power and act and react upon one another for good or evil is a key component of Africa's traditional religions (*ibid*).

In Africa, unseen beings are prioritised over visible beings in the hierarchy of existence. The supreme being (usually God or Allah), numerous non-human spirits, ancestral spirits, ghosts, and other invisible entities are believed to exist alongside visible beings, such as humans, animals, plants, and both natural and man-made objects (Nyangweso, 2015). There are three common traits of African religions, which enable scholars to discuss them as one: the belief in a supreme being, the realm of spirits, and a unified community (Krüger *et al.*, 2009).

Religions help people to understanding life and death, health, illness, and all other fortunes and misfortunes (Read, 1966). In the African context, a belief in supernatural beings provides an explanation for misfortunes like death, sickness, and economic troubles (Ferdinando, 1995). The aetiology, prevention, and alleviation of human suffering is a topic with which traditional African religion is most directly concerned (*ibid*). For instance, when disruption happens, it is always perceived as personal: "In modern rural Africa, nothing happens except through divine or human ill-will... Misfortunes occur because somewhere, someone has bewitched you; or somehow, sometime, you have failed to do, or done incorrectly, some prayer or sacrifice" (Nottingham, 1959:2).

In the larger conversation between religion and science, substantial discussions have taken place about the relationship between faith and medicine (Levin, 2018). Empirical studies on religion and health first appeared between 1950 and 1980, with a significant increase in the 1980s (VanderWeele, 2017). There is increasing recognition of the significant links between religion and health (Rumun, 2014). For better or worse, religion is highly relevant in the health systems of many

communities (Cohen & Koenig, 2004; Levin, 2010), for example, “as an etiologic, therapeutic, or palliative agent in psychotherapy” (Levin, 2010). As they may affect and contribute to the cause of illnesses, alter symptoms, and change beliefs and explanations of health disorders, religious beliefs play a key role in the health systems of societies (Bhugra *et al.*, 2021). This is particularly true in traditional African religions, which, in addition to performing a variety of other functions, play an important role in community health.

This study investigated the spiritual practices among the Raya community in southern Tigray, northern Ethiopia, with a focus on the complex relationship between belief in supernatural powers and entities and health practices. Describing the community’s religious beliefs and other cultural convictions around supernatural entities, this study focused on understanding the role of religious beliefs in sickness aetiology, its prevention, and the choice of therapeutic alternatives to alleviate physical and mental health disorders. Before describing the methodology of this research, the following sections set out the theoretical dimensions relevant to this study, including in relation to beings and forces and sickness aetiologies. This is followed by the findings, a discussion, and brief conclusion.

## **Theoretical Dimensions**

### **Religious Entities: Beings and Forces**

Cross-cultural studies have identified four religious entities, namely: spiritual beings, human spirits, nonhuman spirits, and spiritual forces (Eller, 2007). All religions have beliefs about spiritual beings (Henninger-Rener, 2020; Eller, 2007), which are categorised around monotheism and polytheism (Henninger-Rener, 2020). According to Eller (2007), spiritual beings are individuals with wills, minds, and personalities of their own; they do not have physical bodies, do not occupy space, are able to coexist in the same space as physical bodies, and can move and behave in ways that go against natural laws. They also do not age or die.

There is also a belief that humans have a spiritual element that cohabits their natural body (Henninger-Rener, 2020; Eller, 2007), which is one of the most pervasive and ‘natural’ ideas across different cultures (Eller, 2007). According to Christian tradition, this spiritual component is infused into humans from the outside (it was ‘breathed into’ the first human being), resides in human bodies in an enigmatic manner, and separates from the body after death to continue existing in another form (Eller, 2007:36).

Eller also notes that there are many other categories of spiritual beings that have never been, and never will be, human. ‘Nature spirits’, or spirits that ‘are’ or ‘are in’ plants, animals, natural objects, or natural forces, are probably the most prevalent of these, as first observed by E.B. Tylor and formulated as animism (Eller, 2007). A person or group of people (a family, clan, village, etc.) may have a special spiritual bond with a particular species or object, which designates the species or

object as the person or group's 'totem'; this bond prompts special behaviour toward the totem, such as refraining from eating it (Eller, 2007).

In addition to the spirits of particular plants, animals, and objects, many societies also acknowledge spirits that are independent of any particular material form and have their own distinct 'reality' (Eller, 2007). These beings may be helpful, harmful, mischievous, or unaware of their effects on humans; they may exhibit good, bad, or indifferent attitudes toward humans. Demons, devils, and a variety of other culturally specific entities are examples of such beings (Eller, 2007).

Moreover, not all faiths include 'beings', and those that do often do not focus exclusively on them (Eller, 2007). There are also frequent assertions about impersonal spiritual forces—forces that are not necessarily connected to any specific living creature and lack a 'mind' or 'will' of their own (Eller, 2007). A supernaturally occurring power that permeates nature and gives it the characteristics that one observes implies spiritual powers. Animism is the common word for a religion that emphasise these forces in living things (Henninger-Rener, 2020; Eller, 2007).

### **Sickness Aetiologies**

Many scholars have offered different theories about the aetiology of sickness and disease. In the early 1900s, Forrest Clements offered five theories to explain disease causation: sorcery, which attributes sickness to the use of magical methods or mystical control by people over supernatural forces; breach of taboo, which explains illness as a divinely sanctioned punishment for breaking religious or social taboos; disease object intrusion and spirit intrusion, which link disease to malevolent foreign objects like pebbles, splinters, or small animals in the body of the victim; and soul loss, which is the idea that illness is brought on by the soul becoming physically separated from the body (Clements, 1932; see also Rogers, 1944).

In more recent literature, Linda Garro (2000) described the "three better-known" frameworks of theories of illness and disease causation by Murdock (1980), Young (1976), and Foster (1976). The first framework involves two main categories, namely, natural causation and supernatural causation (Murdock, 1980). The second framework includes naturalistic and personalistic causation (Foster, 1976). The third framework splits causation into externalising and internalising systems (Young, 1976). These theories have continued to be significant in contemporary cross-cultural studies on the subject (Garro, 2000). Accordingly, these theories are briefly presented here, together the four classifications of sickness causation by Amzat and Razum (2014)—natural, supernatural, mystical, and hereditary/genetic—to give a comprehensive picture of the different theories of the aetiology of sickness and disease.

Starting with the *first framework*, Murdock (1980) groups the theories of **natural causation** into four categories—infection, stress, organ deterioration, and accident—which explain a person's health condition as a physiological or bodily phenomenon (Murdock, 1980; Garro, 2000). Diseases with natural causes can be identified clinically or medically (see also Amzat & Razum, 2014).

Although some diseases may be explained based on many causations, traditional African religions maintain a cogent stance on the biomedical explanation of illness as it relates to natural causes (Amzat & Razum, 2014). Murdock's second category, **supernatural causation**, which modern medical does not recognise as valid (Garro, 2000), describes an alternative source of sickness brought on by phantom spirits that reside both inside and outside the confines of human society (Murdock, 1980; Foster, 1976; Garro, 2000; Amzat & Razum, 2014).

There are eight kinds of supernatural causation described by Garro, which are group into three main types: mystical causation (consisting of fate, ominous sensations, contagion, and mystical retribution); animistic causation (soul loss and spirit aggression); and magical causation (sorcery and witchcraft) (Murdock, 1980; Garro, 2000). According to Murdock, **mystical causation** is described as "any theory which accounts for the impairments of health as the automatic consequences of some acts or experience of the victim mediated by some putative impersonal causal relationship rather than by the intervention of a human or supernatural being" (*ibid*, 1980:17). The four types grouped under this category are fate, ominous sensations, contagion, and mystical retribution.

**Fate** is described as "the ascription of illness to astrological influences, individual predestination, or personified ill luck" (*ibid*, 1980:17). **Ominous sensations** are "the experiencing of particularly potent kinds of dreams, sights, sounds, or other sensations which are believed actually to cause and not merely to portend illness" (Murdock, 1980:18). **Contagion**, the only type of supernatural causation recognised by modern medicine (Murdock *et al.*, 1978), is described as "coming into contact with some purportedly polluting object, substance, or person" (Murdock, 1980:18). The fourth type of mystical causation is **mystical retribution**, which is described as "acts in violation of some taboo or moral injunction when conceived as causing illness directly rather than through the mediation of an offended or punitive supernatural being" (Murdock, 1980:18).

The theory of **animistic causation** "ascribes the impairment of health to the behaviour of some personalised supernatural entity—a soul, ghost, spirit, or god" (Murdock, 1980:19). Murdock includes theories of soul loss and spirit aggression in this group. **Soul loss** is "the ascription of illness to the voluntary and more than temporary departure of the patient's soul from his body" (Murdock, 1980:19). This is to be distinguished from the soul's involuntary departure caused by an act of sorcery (Murdock *et al.*, 1978). **Spirit aggression** is defined as "the attribution of illness to the direct hostile, arbitrary, or punitive action of some malevolent or affronted supernatural being" (Murdock, 1980:20), which is claimed by Murdock to be the most prevalent and frequent form of supernatural cause (Murdock *et al.*, 1978).

The theory of **magical causation** includes "any theory which ascribes illness to the covert action of an envious, affronted, or malicious human being who employs magical means to injure his victims" (Murdock, 1980:20–21). Under this group, Murdock (1980) has included two theories of health problem causation: sorcery and witchcraft. **Sorcery** is described as "the ascription of the



impairment of health to the aggressive use of magical techniques by a human being, either independently or with the assistance of a specialized magician or shaman” (Murdock, 1980:21), while **witchcraft** is defined as “the ascription of the impairment of health to the suspected voluntary or involuntary aggressive action of a member of a special class of human beings believed to be endowed with a special power and propensity for evil” (*ibid*, 1980:21).

Characterising non-Western medical systems, the *second framework* that is inclusive (Garro, 2000), as delineated by Foster (1976), includes **naturalistic** and **personalistic** causation. Foster articulated this framework as follows:

*A personalistic medical system is one in which disease is explained as due to the active, purposeful intervention of an agent, who may be human (a witch or sorcerer), nonhuman (a ghost, an ancestor, an evil spirit), or Supernatural (a deity or other very powerful being). [...] In contrast to personalistic systems, naturalistic systems explain illness in impersonal, systemic terms. Disease is thought to stem, not from the machinations of an angry being, but rather from such natural forces or conditions as cold, heat, winds, dampness, and, above all, by an upset in the balance of the basic body elements. (Foster, 1976:775)*

According to the principles of naturalistic causation, achieving bodily balance is the goal of the intervention, as outlined by Foster, and people can preserve good health by avoiding conditions and/or behaviours that lead to sickness. In personalistic causation, there seems to be significant overlap between what is commonly referred to as religion, magic, and medicine. Magic, medicine, and religion are all intertwined and comprise a complicated whole whose religious purpose is to promote community health (Foster, 1976). In this system, the focus of the intervention is on identifying the cause of the illness (Garro, 2000).

The *third framework*, as set out by Young (1976), includes externalising and internalising systems. **Internalising** systems, which typically represent Western medicine or biomedicine, rely on physiologically explained and conceptualised intrinsic mechanisms. The **externalising** scheme describes certain crucial medical events that happen outside the body of the sick individual, depending on the aetiologic explanations of various health conditions. In this instance, the health issue is a sign of strained relationships and the pathogenic agents are typically intentional, frequently human or incarnated.

A *fourth framework* is put forward by Amzat and Razum (2014). Perhaps drawing on the previously stated theories, they identified four causes of illness and disease, i.e., natural, supernatural, mystical, and hereditary/genetic. The **natural** causation, adopted in the germ theory of disease, denotes the biomedical elucidation of a disease’s causation (Amzat & Razum, 2014). The **supernatural** causes originate from gods, spirits, deities, and other supernatural beings like wizards and witches (Foster, 1973), but they also have divine attributions, as in the case of Christianity and Islam (Amzat &

Razum, 2014). The **mystical** causes are part of the personalistic causes of illness (Foster, 1976; Amzat & Razum, 2014). Mystical retribution is described as in response to behaviour that violates important cultural norms and values and could result in disease (Murdock, 1978; Amzat a& Razum, 2014). Finally, **hereditary** diseases are those health disorders that are transmissible through genetic factors (Amzat & Razum, 2014).

Using the aforementioned theoretical elements as a foundation, this study explored an alternate source of sickness and disease caused by phantom spirits that exist both inside and outside the boundaries of human society using the ideas of supernatural causation (Foster, 1976; Murdock, 1980; Garro, 2000; Amzat & Razum, 2014). Biomedicine, by definition, has focused on illustrating the cause and effect, diagnostic procedures, and potential remedial measures for disease. This ethnographic study focuses on the causes of sickness and disease explained by the Raya community, based on their religious belief systems.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This section describes the study area and study community, and details the research methods employed to collect primary data.

### **Study Area and Community**

The Raya community in northern Ethiopia is located partly in the southern zone of Tigray regional state and partly in the northeast of Amhara regional state. Historical records indicate that the Raya area was inhabited by the Doba<sup>3</sup> people. As a consequence of several historical factors, including Oromo expansion into this area and cultural contact with the adjacent Amharic, Tigrinya, and Afar speaking communities, the area presents a cultural mosaic with Tigrayan, Afar, Amhara, and Oromo communities (Mahder, 2019; Kibrom, 2013; Alemu & Sisay, 2017). This had led to the emergence of distinctive cultures in the area (Mengesha, 2010; Bereket, 2021).

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<sup>3</sup>As documented by Francisco Alvers in the 1520s, the Doba community has lived in this area. However, this community is no longer found in present-day Ethiopia (Begna, 1990; Mengesha, 2010; Kibrom, 2013). The Doba people were attacked and defeated to extinction by Atse Ba'ede Mariam in the well-known expedition of the 15 century (Pankhurst, 2005).

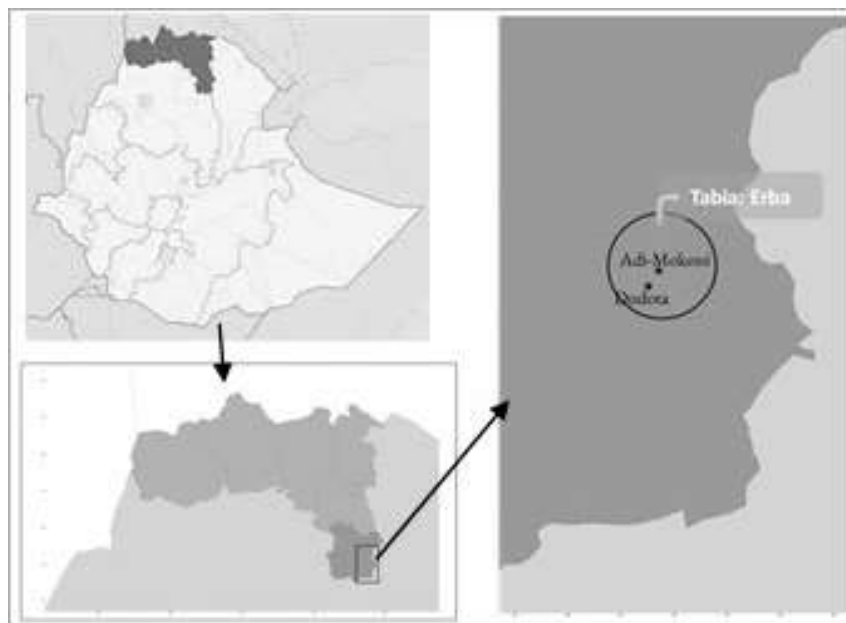


Figure 1. Map of the study area; Raya-Ch'ersch'er Woreda, T'abya Erba

Tigrinya, Amharic, Oromifa, and Afar languages are spoken in parts of the Raya area (Kibrom, 2013). The two organised faiths practised by the study community are Islam and Christianity (Alemu & Sisay, 2017; Kibrom, 2013). But there are also beliefs, rituals and customs that are not connected to any of these two monotheistic religions (Kibrom, 2013; Desale, 2003; Alemu & Sisay, 2017). The two religions, Islam and Christianity, coexist with the traditional belief system, which have incorporated some of the core notions and rituals of the indigenous belief system (Alemu & Sisay, 2017).

This study was conducted in *T'abya* Erba in Raya-Ch'ersch'er<sup>4</sup> woreda (district) in southern Tigray. The fieldwork for data collection was carried out in two villages in *T'abya* Erba, namely: Dodota (a *Qushet*) and Adi-Mokoni (a small village or *got'* (*ጎጥ*) in *Qushet* Erba). Dodota is a large village (*Qushet*) where both Muslims and Orthodox Christians live. Adi-Mokoni is inhabited only by Orthodox Christians, but located between villages inhabited by Muslims, Dodota being at its southern side. Both villages are located west of Ch'ersch'er town and on the eastern edge of the Raya Valley.

<sup>4</sup> The ITYOPIS standard is used for the translation and transcription of the Ge'ez script, as well as local names and words.



## **Research Methods**

This study employed an ethnographic approach to explore the intersection of religious beliefs and health practices within the Raya community in southern Tigray, Ethiopia, thus, making it inherently descriptive in nature. The primary data collection methods used were interviews and case studies. The study relied upon qualitative data, consisting of narratives and the lived experiences of members of the community. No quantitative data was used. Ethical administrative clearance to conduct the study was secured from Mekelle University, Institute of Paleo-Environment and Heritage Conservation. The interviews and case study methods are detailed as follows.

Interviews with were conducted with 19 (6 female) purposively selected participants, 8 of which were Muslim, among whom one was *shek*,<sup>4</sup> and the remaining were Orthodox Christians including a priest. The time spent per interview ranged from 20 minutes to 3 hours. Out of the total 19 respondents, 4 were interviewed twice in 2 different phases. The interviewees were selected based on their specialised knowledge of the culture of the community.

While preliminary data collection was carried out in June 2023, formal data collection was done from 4 to 14 January 2024. All of the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview questionnaire prepared prior to the fieldwork.

While the majority of the interviews were conducted in the study *Qushets* in Raya-Ch'erch'er, namely, Dodota and Adi- Mokoni villages, two were conducted in Raya-Alamata via phone from Mekelle. Interviews with four of the study participants were recorded as audio and the responses of one interviewee were captured in a notebook. While all research participants consented to the interviews and data provisions, some declined to have their interview audio-recorded. Consequently, considering the interview time and space, the researcher refrained from requesting permission to make audio recordings from the remaining respondents.

The cases were selected to substantiate the interviews and observation results and are presented in the study findings. These include three cases on supernatural entities and one case of an individual with supernatural powers, which were captured in January 2024. The cases have been used as a gateway to unpack the wider community's beliefs about supernatural powers and their role in health practices.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Belief in Spiritual Beings**

The Raya community predominantly adheres to either Christianity or Islam. Consequently, the study community believes in the well-known spiritual entities, God (አገግሃር) and Allah. Both Christianity and Islam embrace monotheism; however, certain branches of Christianity

conceptualise God as a Trinity, consisting of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Within the Raya community, there is unanimity in the description of God, particularly regarding His omnipotence, omnipresence, and eternal nature. Generally, God is perceived to be merciful and compassionate; however, any form of insult or disrespect, disregarding His power, or violating cultural taboos could result in different kinds of trouble, including, but not limited to, sickness. Any calamity that happens to someone believed to have resulted because of God's anger about their misconduct is locally described as a consequence of God's annoyance (Tigrinya: እዝግሃር ሓዝኑሉ/ላ).

God is locally known as *Egziabher*, or the shortened form *Ezghar*. He is also called *Amlak*. God is believed to have created everything and has the ultimate power. There are other entities that are believed to intermediate between God and humanity, namely, angels and saints, locally called *mela'ekti* and *tsadqanat*, respectively. Angels are called 'messengers' by members of the Muslim community.

Angels (*mela'ekti*) are those entities created by God and given power by God himself. They possess supernatural powers. Saints (*tsadqanat*) are persons who are given power for the good things they have done for mankind and who are recognised as having an exceptional degree of holiness, likeness, or closeness to God. Saints are not believed to have power of their own, but only that granted by God, yet they are respected and venerated. Angels include Michi'al (Michael), Rufael (Raphael), and Gebrial (Gabriel). Saints include Jiwergis (George), Abune Teklehaimanot (Ethiopian monk and saint), Aba Kiros, Aba Gabr, Mariam (Saint Mary), Kidist Arsema (Saint Hripsime), and Abune Aregawi (monk and saint).

Saints are revered, mainly by Orthodox Christians. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church dogma, all of the angels and saints have a monthly date on the Ethiopian calendar<sup>5</sup> dedicated to them on which they are remembered and celebrated by followers. For example, the first day of each month is for Lideta (Birth of the Holy Virgin Saint Mary), day 4 is for Yohans, 5 is for Gebre Menfes Qiddus, 7 is for Slasie (the holy Trinity), 8 is for Abba Kiros, 12 is for Michael the Archangel, 14 is for Abune Aregawi, 16 is for Kidana-Mihret (Lady of Covenant of Mercy), 19 is for Gabriel the Archangel, 21 is for the Holy Virgin Mary, 23 is for Jiworgis (Saint George), 24 is for Abune Tekle Haimanot, 27 is for Medhanye Alem (Saviour of the World), and 29 is for Ba'ale Egziabher (Feast of God the Son). Some of the dedicated dates, such as Trinity Day, Saint Mary's Day, Michael the Archangel's Day, Gabriel Archangel's Day, and Ba'ale Egziabher are mandatory to commemorate; the others are optional and depend on the nearest church dedicated to any of the angels or saints. For followers

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<sup>5</sup> Ethiopia has its own calendar, also called the Ge'ez calendar. According to the Ethiopian calendar, there are 13 months in a year, 12 of them having 30 days each, and an additional 13th month called *P'agume* (Tigrinya: ቆገ-ጫጌ) with 5 days, and 6 days in a leap year. There is a gap of seven to eight years between the Ethiopian and Gregorian calendars, with the Ethiopian calendar being behind. The Ethiopian new year is celebrated on 1 September in the Ethiopian calendar. Depending on the month, the converted dates between Ethiopian and Gregorian calendars vary. Dates between Ethiopian and Gregorian calendars can be converted using the tool: [https://www.metaappz.com/Ethiopian\\_Date\\_Converter/Default.aspx#EthiopianConverter](https://www.metaappz.com/Ethiopian_Date_Converter/Default.aspx#EthiopianConverter).

not to respect, believe in, or celebrate their day is believed to result in misfortune. In this case, one interviewee stated the following:

*The followers are expected to rest on these days and not to work or take up any labour-intensive task; otherwise, it would be considered violating the norm and showing disrespect to the saints and angels, which would result in a punishment. For example, if a Christian farmer ploughs on Angel Gabriel's Day (19<sup>th</sup> of every month in the Ethiopian Calendar), certain misfortune would befall on him. Angel Gabriel is exceptional in this case in that he easily gets disappointed, but all the other angels and saints would also feel saddened and send certain disaster on those who violated these rules. (Interview with a priest KG, face-to-face, Adi-Mokoni, 7 January 2024)*

Disasters could include a family member falling ill, death of one's animals, a wound to the body of the offender, a snake bite, sudden death of a family member, a fire burning the farm, or being eaten by a wild animal. Therefore, community members believe that, among other things, failure to believe in angels and saints or disrespecting them could cause a major misfortune including disease or mental illness. In addition to the dates assigned to angels and saints, all Orthodox Christian followers are expected not to work on Saturdays and Sundays, otherwise, similar punishments from God could follow.

The Muslim participants in the study community also believe that there are angels like Gabriel, who, in the Islam religion, were created by Allah and serve as prophets and messengers to convey God's messages. The assignment of dates to the angels and prohibiting working on those days does not exist in the Muslim community; Muslims are able to work on all days except specific religious holidays.

In Orthodox Christianity, disrespecting the holiness of the angels and saints can result in a variety of misfortunes. However, those who truly believe in angels and saints can receive protection from misfortune and health complications. Ascribing holiness to these entities to prevent or treat any misfortune or health problem is done by attributing a *tsebel* to them. A *tsebel* can be in the form of water, ash, oil, or soil upon which priests have prayed, making them holy. There are also believed to be holy waters in springs (ፀብል/ጥንጮሎት), which are considered sacred. Angels and saints are believed to have the power to cure or heal several physical or mental health problems.

### ***Case 1. Angel Gabriel – A Supernatural Entity***

*Situated in Asayo village, in the southwestern part of the study area, the Church of Angel Gabriel stands as one of the oldest churches in the area. Angel Gabriel is believed to be a hot-tempered entity and the Orthodox Christian community believe that violating any norm in relation to the Angel Gabriel will instantly result in misfortune.*

*The following transgressions could anger Angel Gabriel: defaming him, thinking or saying that he does not have supernatural powers, turning down a request made in his honour, cutting down trees or even branches from the church compound, doing any labour-intensive work on the date dedicated to him (which is the 19<sup>th</sup> of every month in the Ethiopian calendar), or committing to making the monthly worship, but failing to do so.*

*If anyone commits one or many of the above violations and sudden misfortune happens to them, their family, or their assets, then it is attributed to their transgression. The measure to prevent such misfortune is not to commit any of these violations. There are also several remedial options, depending on the problem. The required remedial action is to make propitiation with the angel, so that further misfortune does not follow and the problem that occurred is resolved. This is usually done by admitting the mistake and praying for mercy from the angel. After the reconciliation is made, some other remedies can be used, like the use of tsebel (holy spring water), traditional herbal medicine, or even modern medicine in the case of a wound.*

### **Human and Non-human Sprits**

Highly influenced by the two monotheistic religions, in the study community, there is a belief that humans have spirits, which are locally called *tinfas* or *estinfas*, also called *nebsi* (Tigrinya: ትንፋስ/እስትንፋስ/ነብሲ). People are believed to have two beings, their physical being and a soul, which are separated at death. People also believe that the spirits of ancestors, the non-physical representation of a deceased relative, live nearby and interact with the family, for better or worse. This is often attributed to the individual having special powers while they were alive.

The study community do not appear to hold many beliefs associated with plants, animals, or other objects. However, some animals are revered by the study community, which again is linked with Orthodox Christianity. For example, the frog is revered, protected, and approached with friendliness and respect. Anyone can protect a frog, hug it or play with it, and return it to a water body if it was found in a dry area. Chameleons, on the other hand, are killed whenever encountered by those who are able to do so. People are advised to cover their mouths before killing a chameleon to avoid inhaling its vapours, as chameleons are believed to cause certain sickness.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Such as reverence for frogs, which results from the following story about a frog and a chameleon: Once upon a time, the house of

Another well-recognised act of reverence is towards snakes, particularly among lineages believed to have a special association with them. This concept is locally referred to as *'haw teben'* (አወ ተብን), which translates to 'brother of a snake'. In the study community, some individuals are believed to have been born alongside snakes. The children and grandchildren of these individuals are considered to be relatives of snakes; hence, they do not kill snakes. It is believed that if bitten by a snake, they will not be poisoned, die, or feel the pain. Most importantly, if someone in the area is bitten by a snake, it is believed that he or she must quickly wear any cloth of a 'brother' of a snake to neutralise the poison.

### **The Devil – The One and the Many**

In Orthodox Christian belief, Satan (ሰይጣን) or the Devil is acknowledged as a real entity. In the study community, according to the teachings of the Orthodox Church, it is believed that evil originated from an angel created by God, who was appointed to lead all other angels. One day, God withdrew for some time, and the Devil started to claim that he was the creator and claimed supreme power and ultimate authority. On his return, upon learning of this, God deemed the Devil to be evil and cursed him to leave the Kingdom of Heaven.

The above narrative describes the Devil as being one in number. He is perceived by the study community to be invisible and black in colour. He is believed to be the representation of all evil on Earth, with the ability to push or tempt people to commit sins.

In addition to the above understanding of the singular form of Satan or the Devil, the community also believes that 'devils' can be many in number, perhaps as many as human beings. These devils can be female or male, like humans. Devils are believed to have almost the same daily life as human beings. They reproduce, play games, and work on household tasks like cooking, drinking coffee, and boiling and drinking milk. They are invisible, but sometimes manifest themselves in a human form in various places when they think people will not be around. This includes in the middle of the night, near big rivers or big trees, or in places where people would not be found at this time.

As to whether or not there is more than one devil, an interviewee stated that the Bible says: "When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick" (Matthew 8:16). Referring to the Tigrinya term ኢጋንጎቲ, meaning spirits, used in this verse, he said that the Bible is telling us that devils are actually many in number; he also said that the Tigrinya term ኢጋንጎቲ is plural and the term devils in the English version of the Bible is also plural.

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the Holy Virgin Mary was burned. All animals on Earth came to help Saint Mary extinguish the fire. From all animals, only the frog came with water to help the extinguish the fire, and the chameleon came with flame to aggravate the burn of the house. As a result, frogs were blessed to live in water and be protected by humans, while chameleons were cursed and destined to be killed by humans (Source: fieldwork, January 2024).

In the Raya community, many individuals claim to have physically seen devils playing, drinking milk or coffee, or doing other tasks. This happens when an individual unexpectedly walks around at the time and place suitable for the devils to show up and approaches the devils unnoticed. If devils see humans approaching, they become invisible. But sometimes they forget the materials they were using; hence, humans see signs of them and note their presence. Furthermore, young devils are incapable of understanding the significance of such incidents and sometimes remain where they are and are, hence, are seen by humans.

The terms ‘devil’ and ‘demon’ are used interchangeably by people in the study community, having the direct translations *seyt’an* and *ganen* (Tigrinya: ሰይጣን ፤ ጋኔን), respectively. For a female demon or group of female demons, the local term used is *zarti* (ዛርቲ). Female demons are seen carrying their children and doing other tasks, the same as those performed by women in the study area. In addition to dwelling in big rivers, under big trees, and on mountains, *zarti* are also believed to stay in places used for waste disposal.

In the health belief system of the Raya community, devils, whether one or many, cause sickness. This is locally explained as an attack by a devil (ሰይጣን ወቅድ-ዎ/ዎ). In one’s living area or elsewhere, being at the wrong place at the wrong time could result in an assault, a mental or physical violation, by a devil. Depending on the aggressiveness of the devil, individuals can experience serious mental illness, physical sickness, or even sudden death. To mitigate health complications from such instances, community members are advised to avoid certain places and times where/when devils are likely to move around.

In addition to being found at the wrong place and time, there are some situations in which people become more vulnerable to any form of violation from demons resulting in health problems. One of them is on rainy days, when people are advised not to shelter under big trees, for thunder could hit the devil residing in the tree and crush it, and the people sheltering could experience collateral damage from the injury inflicted on the devil. Due to the belief that devils avoid iron, iron objects are placed on trees to prevent such incidents from occurring. This practice is also used by new mothers, who are believed to be particularly vulnerable to the influence of devils. They are advised to carry iron with them while moving about and to place iron under their pillow to protect themselves from any potential harm from a devil.

Similarly, in cases of interpersonal or group conflict resulting in injury with severe bleeding, particularly a head injury, it is believed that the injured person becomes vulnerable to demonic attacks, which could lead to additional health problems, typically neurological and mental health issues. To mitigate additional health issues, a chicken is slaughtered at the exact location where the injury occurred. This is locally known as *dorora* (ዶሮራ). The spirit of the demon is appeased by the blood of a chicken, preventing further harm to the injured person.



A bride and groom on their wedding day are also considered to be vulnerable to harm from evil incidents caused by jealousy or malevolent spirits. In the study community, it is believed that certain individuals and demons may harbour jealousy towards the newlywed couple and seek to harm them in various ways. On the day of the wedding, the males from the groom's side—including the groom, his friends, his father, his godfather, a priest, and some other older people—must go to the bride's house and then bring her to the groom's house. They believe that jealous people or demons could harm them as they travel back. To minimise this risk, members of the wedding party on the groom's side take a different route while returning to the bride's house in order to prevent any harm from people or demons. In addition, while crossing wide rivers and sitting under big trees, chickens are slaughtered and thrown away to alleviate the potential harm from demons. In this way, the blood of the chicken will tranquilise (የረጋግፆ) the demon. This process is called *meshageri miqeña* (መሻገሪ ምቀኛ), which literally means 'crossing over cruelty'.

In the Raya community, the terms *qole* and *Seitan* are used interchangeably to refer to a devil, a demon, or Satan. Depending on the context, *qole* and *Seitan* may also be used alongside another term, *gni*. *Qole* conceptually means a spirit that possesses certain natural beings including human beings. Among the Raya community, every human being is believed to have a *qole*. The phrase '*qole deyblu*' (ቆለ ደይብሉ/ላ) is a popular expression that says that the absence of a spirit in a person is abnormal. The phrase literally means someone who does not have a *qole*. The term *qole* is also used alternatively with *gni* (ግኒ).

A *qole* can also exist within a specified territory, without necessarily possessing an individual human being. This is communally referred to as *qole-adi* (ቆለ ዓዲ), a superior power whose duty is to defend the permanent inhabitants of its domain from hostile 'external' forces that might bring about tragedy. A *qole-adi* is considered to have additional powers such as to prevent rain and disrupt monsoons, if the usual sacrifices are not performed in time, as well as to cause diseases and other misfortunes. The realisation of power varies from *qole* to *qole*, depending on the aggressiveness of their nature.



Figure 2. Locations of popular demons *Gewgew* (A) at Ch'erch'er area and *Babie* (B) at T'umuga area

There is a river called Hawa located between the two villages, Dodota and Adi-Mokoni. It is believed that there are devils (with no specific names) at every water point along the river. The dominant demon is left handed, bald and has the appearance of a mid-aged man; he is believed to parade around in all of his finery. This demon, without a name, is primarily recognised for the security he provides to the inhabitants of his domain, but he may become enraged and inflict harm if people are found in the wrong location or at an inappropriate time, particularly at the water points in the middle of the night. The preventive measures include avoiding these 'wrong times and places', traveling in groups, carrying certain metallic items, and so forth.

The demon that resides in a location called Bala-Wuha, close to Bala town, is the most aggressive of all the demons in the area. While there are other villages in between, this location is to the south of Dodota and Adi-Mokoni villages, the villages where the fieldwork was conducted. It is nearly a given that he will harm non-residents of his land severely if they wash in the Hawa river. While

there are several demons in almost every village, the two most popular and dominant demons in the study area are *Gewgew* and *Babie* (see Boxes 2 and 3).

***Case 2. Demon Gewgew – A Supernatural Entity***

*Gewgew is a qole or a demon believed to have been living in Raya-Ch'erch'er and Alamata areas. His territory covers from the north of Raya-Ch'erch'er in the border area with Afar, down to Alamata town. Gewgew is believed to be soft and less harmful. He is rather protective of the people of his territory from external misfortunes.*

*To show power, he sometimes causes harm to communal property or blocks rain, among other things. In such cases, the community is supposed to carry out rituals and make sacrifices<sup>7</sup>—slaughter a sheep or a goat, or sometimes a chicken—to appease him and pray for his mercy. Although not acknowledged by the Orthodox Church, an annual appeasing ceremony must be performed for Gewgew, at which some food and drinks are served. The event takes place in April or May at a mountain called Shilamereb, located east of Weyra-Wuha town. It is made possible through the contributions of many individuals, although only selected representatives are tasked with organising and carrying out the event.*

***Case 3. Demon Babie – A Supernatural Entity***

*Babie is a demon believed to be living in the Tumuga area of Raya Alamata. Babie is a major cause of health issues in this area. He is believed to inflict 'unnatural' pregnancies, pregnancies of babies that will never be born. Such pregnancies can happens to people of all ages and sexes.*

*These pregnancies are believed to be real, as people are actually seen with abdominal bloating. Babie does this to individuals who are found, for example, in the middle of the day or night, but alone, sleeping near or on the banks of a river, under a big tree, or anywhere out of their home. Babie is thought to be more aggressive toward newcomers to his territory, so it is believed to be less likely for newcomers to spend a night in the area and escape without becoming pregnant. There is no treatment for this condition. People who become pregnant because of Babie will die with the pregnancy, no matter how long they live with the affliction.*

**The Gni Tradition**

*Gni* (ግን), also known as *zar* (ዘር), are believed to be demons that control the human body. As stated above, in the Raya community, every individual is believed to have a *qole* or a demon or devil

<sup>7</sup> This specific ritual has little role in the medical practice of the study community, although it has a certain role in stress management, as it is perceived by the community that conducting this ritual will bring good fortune in the future. This event is suggested for anthropological study, given that the ritual, along with its time and space, the ritualistic objects, and the community's perspective and behaviour towards it, can be described.

residing in them. This belief system serves as a source of spirit possession, which is characterised by anomalous or altered states of consciousness and accompanying activities. While every person is believed to have an allied demon or devil, the *gni* spirit occurs mainly in women, but there are cases in which men can also have the spirit. For a specific *gni*, there are a group of people from a common lineage who have faith in it and conduct rituals and make sacrifices as required. The *gni* tradition exists among both Muslim and Christian followers. In the Muslim community, a person with a *gni* is known as *awliya*, and is believed to be an individual with a more advanced *gni* in terms of the aggressiveness and possible harm that the *gni* could cause.

Women with a *gni* can lose their consciousness when they are overtly angry, dance to loud and high-rhythm music, or attend planned events.<sup>8</sup> Depending on the event and source of the spirit possession, different practices are used to cast out the demons. If the spirit possession has occurred because of irritation, arrangements are not required; a time for the person to relax or sleep could simply revive his or her consciousness. If the spirit control happened because of the extended dance with high-pitched music, the solution would be to keep the music on until the spirit is relaxed enough to let the individual(s) lay on the ground.

There are also planned events for possession by a *gni* known as *wadaja* (also known as *dgis*). These are events whereby a ritual is organised with food, drinks, and music for the *gni* to come and possess the individual in order to discover the source and solution of a sickness and then to cast out the spirit. Another planned event for spirit possession is *guzguaz* (ጉጉጓጓ), an event that does not require music, but food and drinks, for the *gni* to come for a certain purpose.

The *gni* spirit is inherited through certain lineages. A woman who had a *gni* passes it on to her chosen daughter; the choice is believed to be made by the spirit itself. The chosen woman who inherits the *gni* could be a sister, granddaughter, or other kin member. This transferring happens when the woman with the *gni* is old enough and physically weak enough to become engaged in the required activities of casting out the spirit. Sometimes, if an aged Christian women with a *gni* chooses to fully become spiritual and committed to the Orthodox Christian Church, and hosting the spirit is not accepted by the priests, they have to transfer the *gni* to another host. The transferring ceremony includes transferring all the power and belongings of the spirit, like clothing, perfumes, animals promised to be sacrificed to it, and ritual objects, etc.

Regarding the health practices of the study community, people possessed by a *gni* are considered to cause sickness to their relatives due to some conditions. Causing anger to an individual hosting a *gni*, denying the power and capability of the *gni*, and forgetting to bring a promised sacrifice for the spirit can result in certain physical or mental health disorders in the individual committing these acts. Individuals possessed by a *gni* are also believed to have the power to cure or heal health

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<sup>8</sup> These planned events are occasions whereby rituals are organised for the spirits to possess individuals for certain purposes, but fundamentally for medical reasons. Such events include *guzguaz* and *wadaja*.

problems, especially if the sickness is considered to be caused by them. For any sickness caused because of the aforementioned factors, admitting one's mistake, offering a gift and asking for a blessing can lead to a cure. To prevent any health complications, the members of the lineage have to comply with the instructions given by the *gni*-hosting individual, respect them, and provide them with various gifts, etc.

Related to the *gni* tradition, the members of the community believe that any health disorder can be transferred to animals, mainly sheep, goats, and chickens, thereby ridding them of the condition. This tradition is called *beyza*. If an individual experiences any health disorder, with the help of elderly individuals, but mainly with the individual having the *gni*, the problem can be transferred to an animal. The animal must be rotated three times around the sick, usually above the sick, while performing this ritual. Then, the animal is not sold, but, in many cases, slaughtered and eaten as sacrifice to the *gni* spirit.

As well as being possessed by *gni*, women are also believed to have other powers in certain circumstances. For example, mothers who give birth to twins are believed to be efficient at healing muscle strains.

### **Dabit – Devil Possessed Whirlwind**

A *dabit* (ዳብት), also called *awera seyt'an* (አወራ ሰይጣን), which literally meaning dust of the devil, is a whirlwind or a funnel-shaped wind that is mobile and destructive. In the study community, this strong wind, which makes circles and sometimes sounds as it moves, is believed to carry a demon or be fully possessed by a devil. Such winds are believed to cause sickness. If a high-speed zigzagging wind, making loops and noise, hits somebody it is believed that individual could be physically or mentally harmed; the physical assault may cause paralysis, blindness, craziness, or deafness. Distancing oneself from the whirlwind is an immediate protection against possible sickness.

### **The Power of Shek**

A *shek*,<sup>9</sup> also called *abo shekna* (father *sheh*), is a follower of Islam who is thought to possess mystical power (ምሽጥራዊ ሓይል— literally means 'secretive power'), inherited from his ancestors and which he can use with or without engaging in religious education. *Shek* are well recognised for the blessings or curses they can bestow upon individuals. Community members believe that whatever a *shek* intends to do to people will undoubtedly occur. A *shek's* power even extends to controlling nature, including bringing rain or guarding against locusts or insects that destroy agricultural crops.

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<sup>9</sup> *Shek*, also spelled as *sheikh*, is an Arab leader, in particular the chief or head of an Arab 'tribe', family, or village; a leader in a Muslim community or organisation. In the Muslim community in the study area, Muslim religious leaders and people believed to have inherited supernatural power with or without religious knowledge are called *shek*.

In the Raya community, there are two villages, namely, Dodota and Adi-Abo Zemez, with well-known *shek*. Although there are numerous *shek* who live in other villages, the most well-known and powerful *shek* in Raya resides in Krawale (Machare area of Raya-Azebo). All *shek* are held in high regard. Everyone, regardless of age, gender, religion, or language differences, respects them. To greet the *shek*, people are obliged to crouch down and kiss their knees. Both Muslims and Christians revere them and follow their directives. Because they are well-respected, anyone can take care of their livestock, and the rest of the community do their agricultural work for them.

***Box-4. The Case of Shek JM – An individual with supernatural power***

*Shek JM lives in Dodota. He is 40 years old and became a shek at an early age after his father's death. Shek JM's grandfather was a renowned shek in the Raya area, succeeded by his son (Shek JM's father) who became very well known throughout Raya as well. In accordance with local tradition, the role of a shek is typically passed down, with the eldest son of the deceased shek succeeding to the position. However, in exceptional circumstances, any son of a shek may be selected for the position based on individual merit. The father of Shek JM was privileged to inherit his father and his uncle's status, as his uncle did not have sons.*

*Shek JM is known for solving conflicts between groups and individuals in the study community. While there is no claim that Shek JM has caused health disorders, there are stories that his forefathers brought sickness to some people, only because the individuals disobeyed their instructions or rejected their orders.*

*When community members want to achieve certain goals, they reach out to Shek JM for his spiritual support. It is believed that if Shek JM gives his blessing for something to happen, then it will surely happen. The community members said that Shek JM and all his forefathers are not considered to have caused deliberate harm. Misfortune will only happen to individuals when they disgrace, disobey, insult a shek, or question their power.*

*In fear of a possible health disorder and misfortune, the community members truly respect Shek JM and follow his decisions in any community engagement. Disobeying advice and instructions and disrespecting him is believed to cause misfortune, including physical or mental health problems.*

*Shek* are also renowned for mediating disputes between individuals and within communities. They use *musbaḥa*, a spherical string of pearls joined by string, to extend invitations to guests at their home. There are 99 pearls, as per the standard of praying in Islam (three *musbaḥa* each with 33 pearls for 3 types of praying), but one can handle a *musbaḥa* with 33 pearls and use it repeatedly while



praying using the 3 themes. The prayer beads are used to help track the number of times a specific religious term or verse is spoken. The colour and size of the pearls do not matter.

Typically, *shek* use a male servant or disciple, locally known as *darasa*, to send the *musbuha* to the person they want to call to their area. However, they could send anyone as a messenger to deliver the *musbuha*. Soon after the message has been delivered, the recipient must visit the *shek* to learn more of why he/she has been summoned. These incidents are typically used to settle disputes or mediate any interpersonal conflict. Therefore, if a *shek* asks someone to do something, he/she must comply with his request; otherwise, the *shek* will be disappointed or curse them, which will cause a variety of unfortunate events, including health issues, the loss of a close relative, or the loss of possessions.

Therefore, concerning health practices, the community believe that *shek* inherit supernatural powers. The curse of a *shek* or igniting their anger would result in a health disorder for oneself or one's descendants. The *shek* can use any means to cause the sickness, including, but not limited to, a snake bite, an accident that causes bodily injury, madness, or giving birth to a mentally or physically disabled child.

Some individuals, because of their natural appearance and experiences, are considered to cause or cure health disorders. While cursing is highly linked to *shek*, people with black or partly black tongues are also considered to have the power to curse and cause misfortune for individuals who disappoint or disgrace them. While anyone can utter a curse, the curse of an individual with a tongue that is partly black is believed to actually materialise and, hence, create misfortune, including sickness.

### **Power of *Deftera/Debtera***

The *debtera* are people with specialised religious training in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Only men can be *debtera*. In the study community, the *debtera* (also referred as *deftera*) can conjure spirits, locally known as *digimti*, should they wish to do so. They are also believed to have the power to communicate with evil spirits using their specialised church training. The evil spirits are called up by the *deftera* at the request of people who are jealous of their friends, work colleagues, or any other person in their way. The person wanting the misfortune to happen pays money or other incentives to the *deftera* to send evil spirits to the designated person to cause problems. The problems they cause range from sickness to burning residential houses and agricultural harvests.

According to community members, there are circumstances in which using *deftera* might be beneficial. An illustration is when people ask a *deftera* to assist them in making *mestefaqr* (መስተፋቅር). *Mestefaqr* is a type of *digimti* that is intended to spark love in the person you desire to wed. It is believed that the *deftera* possess the ability to cause others to fall in love with the

supplicant. The *deftera* could either use a substance along with a *digimti* to apply the *mestefaqr*, or they could just send a spirit to the intended recipient and manipulate them into falling in love.

One respondent stated that *deftera* are usually physically disabled. Hence, their specialised religious knowledge and power are their means of balancing the social status they have lost because of their disability. The *deftera* are believed to be the source of ailments, most frequently mental health problems, because they instruct bad spirits to dominate or possess the chosen victim. Depending on the aggression and power of the evil spirit, the victim may suffer physically or mentally under its influence. While there is little that can be done to mitigate a sickness caused by a *deftera*, avoiding encounters with them and not being in trouble with them helps.

### **The Buda – Supernatural Powers Associated with Blacksmiths**

The *buda* (ቡዳ), locally known as *t'ebb*<sup>10</sup> (ጠቢብ), are believed to possess the power of the evil eye, which is associated with blacksmiths. Among the study community, there is a belief that there are people with the power to cause health problems to the extent of killing their victims. Such people are known for their crafts, specifically blacksmithing, pottery, or both, although there are *t'ebb* who do not practice those crafts. The power is believed to be hereditary; people born to one or both parents having the *buda* lineage are assumed to inherit the power. In the study community, there is a wide belief that the *buda* can change into hyenas, and do whatever hyenas do.

In the rural villages of the Raya area, there are specific villages inhabited only by the *buda*. While there are some exceptions, as in the case of towns, where the *buda* reside together with non-*buda* communities, usually the *buda* communities have separate villages. In the study community, non-*buda* people are described to as *ch'wa*.<sup>11</sup> It is believed that not all people with *buda* lineage cause harm and not all people who are *ch'wa* are victims.

The *buda* are believed to use certain plants to cause harm; if they cut the leaf of the plant, then the victim will die. In addition to the plant used, for the harm to occur, the *buda* must physically see the victim so that her or his evil eye can cause the harm; this is locally believed to be as if the *buda* has 'eaten' the victim (ቡዳ ቢልዕዎ/ዋ). If the *buda* 'eats' somebody and the victim dies, they have the power to unearth the buried body, revive the soul, shift the dead person to another creature, such as a cat, donkey, or another person, and keep them as a bonded servant in the *buda*'s home.

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<sup>10</sup> *T'ebb* is derived from the word *t'ebb* (ጠቢብ), meaning an artist, but it is used with a derogative connotation to describe the people with the arts of blacksmithing and pottery as having a special evil eye that causes harm to people who do not belong to their group. While their work and the settlement pattern of having separate villages and, in some cases, separate churches are acknowledged by the claimed *buda* people, the actual eating of humans and inflicting any health disorder on others is not accepted by them. The social discrimination against the *buda* (blacksmiths and potters) creates a segregation.

<sup>11</sup> Not all non-*buda* people are *ch'wa*, as there are other social classifications used to differentiate between *ch'wa* and non-*ch'wa*.

It is believed that the harm caused by the *buda* is involuntary, because they cannot control the evil eye they possess. Good-looking people are believed to be more vulnerable to *buda* attacks, because they attract the gaze of the *buda*. Semantically, the word ‘eaten’ is used, but in practice the victim is mentally and physically controlled by the *buda*. The control extends to the victim possessing energy and physical strength and speaking the language (or with the accent) of the *buda*. To prevent being harmed by a *buda*, community members are advised to distance themselves from people thought to be *buda* and to cover themselves in public places, such as markets, in case of unexpected encounters. Other preventive measures include putting the leaves of a plant locally called *agol* (ፋፀሊ, አጎል) in one’s pocket, especially when traveling to areas where one might encounter a *buda*. Treatment involves casting out the *buda* spirit from the victim using different therapeutic options.

### ***Ayne-t’ila* – Shadow of the Eye**

*Ayne-t’ila* (ዓይነ-ጥላ) literally means ‘shadow of the eye’. The phrase ‘shadow of the eye’ takes on a conceptual meaning when people are said to be under the influence of an evil spirit that has trailed them. Individuals possessed by the *ayne-t’ila* spirit are assumed to be very shy and lack confidence in social situations. They also tend to deviate from typical social life, because they do not fit it. They frequently fall short of their goals, because they act outside of social norms. For instance, those affected by the *ayne-t’ila* spirit would not be able to persuade others with their words, form happy marriages, or, overall, lead fulfilling lives. The shy personality trait can apply to persons of all ages. Occasionally youngsters afflicted by *ayne-t’ila* can become irrationally stubborn and unruly.

It is believed that *ayne-t’ila* results from jealousy of others. Because of this jealousy, people afflicted with the *ayne-t’ila* spirit prevent the target person from attaining something, giving the resentful person the opportunity to profit from the achievement. As a result, in the Raya community, traits of shyness, deviation from social norms, persistent failures in life, or developing an irrationally tenacious and unruly nature are thought to be mental illnesses brought on by being under the power of an *ayne-t’ila*. For treatment,<sup>12</sup> it is necessary to cast out the *ayne-t’ila*, for which several alternatives are used, including *tsebel* and *shek*, as well as traditional medicine.

### ***T’inqola*: The Power of Foretelling**

*T’inqola* (ጥንቆላ) means the ability to foretell the future, but it could also mean the ability to tell what has already happened. There are some well-known persons who can predict events, but they must be paid for their services. The services they offer include both foretelling future events that the requester might want to know about and revealing past events that the requester was unaware of. These include determining whether or not marriage will bring good fortune, traveling will be safe,

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<sup>12</sup> As the treatment of sickness using these alternatives involves actions, materials, language, etc., hence, rituals, it will be covered in another study that the researcher is working on.

or one's life is at risk, where to look for a missing item, especially an animal, what the cause of someone's illness is, and what to do to solve any personal or societal issue.

The techniques used by *t'inqola* include reading smoke (the smoke must be created by a substance the requester brings called *adrus* [አድሩስ]), using stones (some experts toss a fixed number of small stones in front of them, then read how the stones are dropped and interpret the meaning), star counting, and cup reading (reading the lines created in a cup by spilled over coffee remains). The first two are usually regarded as advanced way of foretelling.

In the health practices of the study community, people with the power of foretelling are not assumed to cause health disorders, but can help in identifying the causes of health problems. These people can predict and inform their clients of any bad luck to come. The bad luck could mean serious illness, death, or other misfortune, which can cause stress and mental illness in people who are foretold to have bad luck.

*T'inqola* use their power, supported by certain rituals, to identify the cause of the health issue and suggest a solution for it. Hence, individuals with any form of mental or physical health issue can send their relative or make a visit to the foreteller to find out the cause of their sickness and any remedial measures. More crucially, people may consult the foretellers for advice on how to harm someone; the foretellers would then provide the advice on where and when to find the ways to harm the intended victim, without necessarily giving the means by themselves.

### ***Guwurto* – Intentional Hurting**

*Guwurto* (ጉዉርቶ) conceptually means doing something harmful to others. This is done through an aggressive application of black magic by a person, either on their own or with the help of a trained expert. The reason for such an act is usually hatred, jealousy, or envy of the target person. The harm could be to the body or mental state of the victim. A popular form of bodily harm is letting the victim eat poisoned food, after which the toxin creates live swarms, insects, lizards, amphibians, etc. inside the abdomen of the victim, called *sray*. Losing consciousness, mental illness, or sudden loss of wealth, etc., can also be attributed to such sickness causation. Preventive measures included avoiding consuming food and drinks vulnerable to poisoning, and the most common treatment is drinking holy spring water (*tsebel*).

### ***Himaq Hilmi* – Bad Dreams**

*Himaq hilmi* (አማቸ ሕልሚ) literally means a bad dream. In the Raya community, there are several dreams with common interpretations. While there are many dreams with good meanings, there are also many that are interpreted negatively. Some of the dreams interpreted positively include climbing mountains, crossing a river, and flying high, which are considered to show upcoming success. Dreaming of coins, guns, and other iron items is believed to be related to reproduction and the chance of giving birth. Seeing a funeral is understood as a wedding. Dreaming of crying with

tears is understood as rain. Dreams of being married (are interpreted as death), being kissed by a deceased relative, especially while traveling (a sign of soon death), being stung by bees (interpreted as being killed by a snake or gunshot), and leaning on someone or anything (a sign of illness). Dreams can be seen for oneself, but also for others. In the study community, dreaming of any of signs of misfortune can lead to stress and fear and, hence, psychological problems.

### **Fate**

The Raya community believe that humans are born with either a good or bad fate, which determines the course of their lives; in a sense, their ultimate lot is predestined. A successful marriage, wealth and fulfilment are validations of a good destiny. A bad destiny is indicated by the person's inability to execute his or her social roles and obligations, poverty, and sudden shocks, such as experiencing the deaths of several relatives at once and especially losing all or many of their children or parents at an early age. These events are traced to supernatural sources, described as if it were written on his or her 'forehead', which contextually means a destiny, or fate, that he or she cannot escape.

Although the concept of destiny is highly connected with the will of God, it is slightly different from the actual will of God. This is justified because the belief in the community is that God would not have an inherent desire for people to experience evil things.

In relation to health, if someone is born with some kind of deformity or bodily or mental health problems, they are assumed to have a bad destiny. This is even more so if the health problem is something culturally and scientifically untreatable, like blindness or a hearing disability. The community believes that such things happen because of the command of an invisible spiritual force that cannot be controlled. In such cases, no one, including God or other divine power, is blamed for what has occurred, hence, there is no 'confrontation with nature'.

### **Contagious Elements**

In addition to the aetiologies of sickness that have already been explored, there are also cultural beliefs that presume the reasons for any kind of health issue. One of them is getting sick after coming into contact with a supposedly contaminated person, animal or object. An illustration of this is touching a deceased cat with unprotected hands, which is perceived by the community to cause scabies. Loss of appetite, nightmares, and fear can also come from touching or seeing a dead person. Another belief is that touching the flowers of vetch (a plant locally known as *Enguaya* [አንጻያ]), or walking on a vetch farm when it flowers, causes paralysis below the hip.

When someone touches or jumps on materials used to shower another paralysed person, it is believed that this contagious substance will result in a physical disorder, such as paralysis below the hip (called *shegri*). A person with *shegri* has to bathe early in the morning for seven consecutively days. Seven lemons, garlic, the root part of *agam* (*Carissa edulis* [forsk]), and the leaf

of a plant called *guba* (*Justicia schimperiana*) wetted in a new gourd for a couple of days has to be used to wash the person. According to local tradition, washing with the water used to moisten the aforementioned items may cure paralysis. The treatment is believed to be extremely effective, especially if the person appears early in the morning on any road and takes a bath; the materials are then thrown on the road and when someone steps over or touches any of the objects, it is believed that they will be paralysed and the person cleansed will recover from the paralysis.

In addition to the above contaminating substances, dermatological diseases like vitiligo and tinea versicolor (locally called *barle*) are believed to be contagious. There are other widespread beliefs that someone with shingles (herpes zoster) should not watch the sky, touch water even for washing, or plough a field, because these activities are all believed to be contagious and would aggravate the condition or nullify any treatment being offered. Similarly, a child caught with chickenpox or measles must not be visited by anyone coming from outside, for the newly arrived might have had sex, which would worsen the child's disease even with just eye contact. This is locally known as *reksi* (ሬክሲ). For health problems considered to be caused by contamination, the preventive measure is to avoid contamination or exposure to these things.

### **Retribution for Forbidden Acts**

In the study community, there are behaviours that are seen to be against some taboo or moral principle and that are believed to be directly causing bad luck without the interference of a revengeful or penalising supernatural being. A good example of this is the belief that one of the person's uncles (mother's brother) will pass away if they clean their teeth at night. Another example is riding into a space in which a donkey has wallowed, which will cause early baldness (as early as before getting married), for which saliva is emitted to neutralise the potential cause of the harm. In most cases, breaking any of the community's cultural taboos is attributed as the cause for a person getting sick.

### **DISCUSSION**

The study found that religious and other cultural beliefs play a significant role in the health practices of the study community. These beliefs offer explanations for the causes of health disorders and suggest prevention or mitigation measures. This helps community members distinguish between actions that can prevent sickness and those that may contribute to it. Additionally, beliefs guide the use of traditional therapeutic practices that are linked to the specific sicknesses explained by these beliefs, as well as other cultural aspects. These findings are illustrated in Figure 3.

For this study, the well-known classification of religious entities (Eller, 2007) was used to see if belief in those entities exist in the study community. The study found that three entities, namely, spiritual beings, human spirits, and spiritual forces, are present in the study community, of which



two—spiritual beings and spiritual forces—have a direct impact on the health practices of the Raya community.

In addition, the study draws on general theories of supernatural disease causation, with a particular focus on Murdock’s theories of supernatural causation (Murdock, 1980). The mystical causations, including fate, ominous sensations, contagion, and mystical retribution, are also found to be applicable in the study community. The concept of destiny (fate); having unusually intense types of dreams which are interpreted as causing or signalling bad luck, including sickness and death (ominous sensations); contamination with allegedly infecting things that cause disease (contagion); and retribution for behaviours thought to be against some taboo or moral commandment (mystical retribution) were found in the study community.

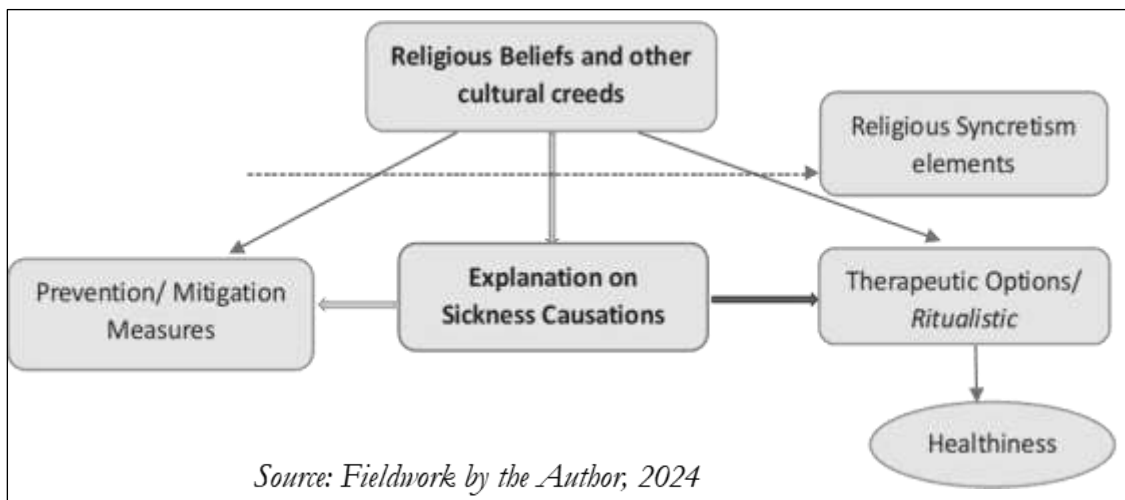


Figure 3. Diagrammatic representation of the study findings in terms of how religious and mystical beliefs influence health practices in the study community

The idea that a hostile, capricious, or vindictive supernatural being is directly responsible for disease—the theory of spirit aggression—was found to have complete acceptance in the study community. The anger of God/Allah, angels, saints, demons, and *gni* spirits is widely believed to have the potential to cause specific physical or mental health disorders. Under animistic causations, the aspect of soul loss, which explains illness as the patient’s soul leaving his/her body voluntarily and for a long period of time, has no or limited application in the study communities. While there is a belief in the temporal departure of the soul, its effect on health is limited.

Sorcery and witchcraft are two elements of sickness aetiologies classified under the component of magical causation. According to Gidena (2017:16), there exists a problem in the Ethiopian context about how the word ‘magic’ is used, as it has been a topic of debate, marked by fuzzy semantics and a

complex conceptual history. He adds that one of the key issues is the multiplicity of words used in Ethiopian languages like Ge'ez and Amharic to mean 'magic' (Gidena, 2017). For this study, however, Murdock's definition and conceptual usage of the word 'magic' are adopted, whereby he defines theories of magical causation as those that label sickness as caused by a human being that is envious, offended, or malicious and has the power to harm his/her victims or enemies.

According to Murdock (1980), sorcery is the connection between aggressive magical practice by a human being, either alone or with the help of a trained magician or spiritualist, and the causation of any form of health problem. The power of *deftera* and foretellers (*t'ingola*) are the matching aetiologies for this perspective. Witchcraft is the attribution of a person's sickness to a member of a particular class of people said to be endowed with a special ability and inclination to cause harm, who may have acted aggressively voluntarily or involuntarily. The power of the *buda* is an appropriate example of the practice of witchcraft.

One sickness causation from the Raya community's perspective that could not be linked to this category is the power of *shek*. Referring to the definition of witchcraft, possessing a power from a different lineage and the ability to harm people is in line with the nature of the *shek*, but the tendency to use the power for evil is not. Hence, the power of *shek* could not be matched with any of Murdock's classifications of supernatural disease causation.

In addition to the sickness causation beliefs articulated above, other cultural creeds such as *ayne-t'ila* (the shadow of the eye) and *dabit* (a demon carrying wind) are also considered to cause health disorders.

In the study area, several modern clinics and health facilities have been established and health extension workers have been deployed, even in the rural areas. The study community's beliefs about sickness prevention and aetiologies and the immense role of supernatural entities can influence people's health seeking behaviour to favour culturally perceived remedies instead of visiting modern health facilities. Hence, sick people could deprioritise the optimal and appropriate consumption of biomedical healthcare treatments. As a result, in many cases, there is a definite clash between the study community's present health practices, which are based on their understanding of the aetiologies of disease, and modern Western medicine, which does not accept theories of supernatural disease causations. For example, the reports of *Babie* inflicting pregnancy is most likely the diarrheal disease giardiasis.<sup>13</sup> This is a typical example of what Anna Tsing (205) calls the friction between two opposing perspectives in the social interactions that make up our modern world.

Individual interactions in the wider social system, and specifically the way people perceive supernatural entities and their role in causing sickness and disease, is a subjective and context-based

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<sup>13</sup> The Tumuga area is a place where giardia parasites (germs) are common in the soil and water.

representation of reality. The understanding of what causes health issues based on Western medicine presents an altogether different view that stands juxtaposed to that of the subjective social construct, in this case, the beliefs of the Raya community. Therefore, it is necessary to approach this in a relativistic manner insofar as the varying representation of reality that serves certain practical issues concerning the well-being of the community. More specifically, individuals who believe that their sickness is the result of a supernatural causation may not seek treatment from modern medicine or, if they do, they may not believe that it will be effective, and, hence, not follow the treatment diligently.

## CONCLUSION

The worldview, cosmology, and health practices of the Raya community are centred around the influence of both malevolent and benevolent spirits. The prominent supernatural beings—God and Allah—as they are referred to by the adherents of Christianity and Islam worldwide, are acknowledged in the study community. Similarly, the Devil and evil spirits are also recognised. Islam and Christianity both accept the idea of a single and supreme God. In addition, for Christians, angels and saints are also believed to have supernatural powers. Angels are supernatural beings that God created and endowed with authority, while saints are believed to only have the power that God has given them. The Raya community, which is profoundly inspired by these two monotheistic faiths, holds the belief that humans have two beings, namely, a physical body and a soul, which are separated at death. Although some animal species, such as frogs and snakes, are given symbolic respect, religious beliefs related to plants, animals, or other items in general were not found to be present in the study community.

In addition to the beliefs stemming from monotheistic religions, the study found a broad spectrum of beliefs in spiritual forces and other cultural creeds related to sickness aetiologies. These beliefs strongly reflect age-old local traditions that may have existed before the introduction of these two major religions into Raya community. These beliefs include the existence of the Devil (being both one and many), and several demons with different characteristics, the *gni* cult, and the demon carrying wind (*dabit*). In addition, other cultural creeds—like the belief in the innate good or evil fate of individuals, the power of religious people, particularly *shek* of the Muslim religion and *deftera* of Orthodox Christianity, the *buda*-supernatural power associated with blacksmiths, the *ayne-t'ila* (shadow of the evil eye), people with the ability to foretell the future (*t'inqola*), and the potential of potent dreams—provide explanations for the causation of health disorders and offer mitigation/preventive measures and traditional therapeutic alternatives.

Some health disorders are believed to occur as a result of the behaviour or actions of the victim, and these have automatic implications suggesting they occurred due to an intervention linked to an impersonal causal relationship. In addition, there are also illnesses considered by the community to have been caused by some personalised supernatural entity (soul, ghost, spirit, or god) or the action of a malevolent human being who employs magical means to injure his victims on his or her own or who through people with assumed specialties.

The understanding of sickness causations, along with the culturally appropriate remedies, have existed for a long time in the local knowledge of the community, thereby maintaining the health and wellbeing of the community members. Hence, convincing a patient that her/his sickness is due to physiological disorder and that the most appropriate treatment is to take modern medication is unlikely to work or be that simple. For example, for a person who believes that his or her disease is caused by a supernatural entity due to some violation, a traditional therapy, rather than an enforced modern remedy, or perhaps a mix of both, would be the only possible treatment option. Because people in the Raya community trust culturally perceived therapies, they may refuse to seek alternative treatments, fail to follow a prescribed course, or remain sceptical of its effectiveness, thereby diminishing its potential benefits even when used.

In addition to the explanations concerning the causes of health disorders and strategies for mitigating and preventing sickness, therapeutic options for treating diseases include the ritualistic administration of traditional or indigenous medicine. These practices are deeply intertwined with the religious beliefs of the Raya community. Although modern or Western medicine does not embrace the theories of disease or illness causations described here, this does not mean that they are not important to the Raya community. Therefore, it is recommended that a separate study be conducted to comprehensively understand the treatment processes involving rituals and indigenous therapies aimed at addressing health disorders caused by supernatural forces and other local beliefs and traditions.

It can be concluded that the worldview, cosmology, and health practices of the Raya community are deeply intertwined with their belief in the influence of both malevolent and benevolent spirits. In this community, the understanding of health and illness is not based solely on physical or medical factors, but is also shaped by spiritual forces. Benevolent spirits are often seen as protectors or healers that play a positive role in maintaining health, ensuring well-being, and offering guidance in times of illness or misfortune. On the other hand, malevolent spirits are believed to cause harm, illness, or misfortune, and are often blamed for diseases or negative events that affect individuals or the community as a whole.

As a result, the health practices in the Raya community incorporate spiritual rituals, offerings, and invocations to appease benevolent spirits and ward off malevolent ones. Healing processes may involve spiritual leaders or shamans who mediate between the human world and the spirit world, performing ceremonies, prayers, or sacrifices to restore balance and health. The community's cosmology, or understanding of the universe and its forces, is, therefore, not limited to the physical realm, but extends to the unseen spiritual world, which plays a crucial role in the overall well-being of individuals and the community. This spiritual perspective on health reflects a holistic approach that integrates both the material and the supernatural in understanding the causes, prevention, and treatment of illnesses.

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