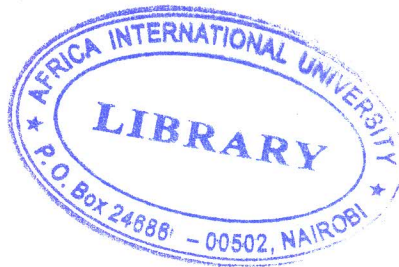


AFRICA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE COGNITIVE FOUNDATION
FOR PARTICIPATION IN *AYYAANA* CULT AMONG BORANA
MUSLIMS IN MARSABIT COUNTY, KENYA


BY
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of the proclivity of the Borana Muslims towards the *ayyaana* possession cult in Marsabit County. The Borana Muslims who participate actively in this cult claim to be authentic Muslims. This claim raises a pertinent question: do their lived experiences comply with the precepts that are stipulated in the Islamic texts concerning the spirit world? This study seeks to answer this question, which has not been given due attention by most contemporary Islamic scholars. There has been an overly skewedness towards the ideological expression of Islam in the heightened need to demystify Islam in the wake of terrorist activities that have turned the limelight on the religion. Yet, such a focus does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of local Muslims vis-à-vis the canonical obligations in Islam.

This study thus seeks to bridge this lacuna by describing the lived experiences of Borana Muslims as they engage with the spiritual beings within their religio-cultural setting. The beliefs and practices involved in the *ayyaana* possession cult are examined in light of the official Islamic tenets as understood and taught by the Muslim teachers in Marsabit County.

A multidisciplinary approach has been employed that uses a cognitive anthropological theoretical framework. Specifically, this study uses the cultural model theory as propagated by Giovanni Bennardo and Victor de Munck (2014), and has also adapted part of their methodological suggestions to discovering cultural models. The study has further used the Synthetic Triangular Approach (STA) guideline proposed by Caleb Kim (2014) in studying religio-cultural phenomena among Muslims from an anthropological perspective. The research methods involved in-depth ethnographic interviews and participant observation. The interviewees included both the Muslim teachers and the Borana Muslims who participate in the *ayyaana* possession cult. Participant observation of the different *ayyaana* cult sessions helped to triangulate what the interviewees said. The theory of minimal counterintuitiveness (MCI) has also been used to analyze the findings.

The findings of this study have been discussed in four analytical chapters. Chapter Four describes the Islamic model of the spirit world as constructed by the Muslims teachers in Marsabit County. Chapters Five and Six describe the religio-cultural model of *ayyaana* as construed by the Borana Muslims who participate in the *ayyaana* cult (they are referred to as *warra ayyaana - ayyaana* people).

Chapter Seven offers a comparative analysis that shows how the religio-cultural model of *ayyaana* compares and contrasts with the Islamic model of jinn. It was realized that the two models have some similarities based on the supernaturalistic worldview espoused in Islam. However, the religio-cultural model of *ayyaana* differs significantly with the Islamic model of jinn. The latter is foregrounded in the cognition of the *warra ayyaana*, while the Islamic model is backgrounded. The religio-cultural model of *ayyaana* is found to be more salient and hence easily transmitted because it is deemed to offer better explanations to their frustrations with supernatural phenomena.