

# TRADITIONS, MODERNITY AND CHANGE IN MARRIAGE PRACTICES AMONG THE SHINASHA PEOPLE, DIBATE DISTRICT (BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ, ETHIOPIA)

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper in an investigation of change in marriage practices and traditions in light of the theoretical underpinning of traditions-modernity nexus. Anchoring it on the historical development of the twentieth century Ethiopia during which the country was exposed to progressively increasing influence of modernization especially sponsored by the central government via its pragmatic policy of centralization, the different areas of the country including those found along the peripheries became subjected to the increasing influence of modernization. This modernization and exposure to different thinking of 'modernity' has resulted in the erosion of 'traditional' practices giving way to the rising influence of 'modern-stamped' practices. Marriage practices especially in urban centers have been hugely influenced by such an exposure to 'modernity'. The Shinasha living in the Benishagul-Gumuz region have also seen such a change in their marriage practices. For instance, the Shinasha traditional marriage practices of the *Īs'tsa*, *Giwa*, *Biqqa* and *'Nataa'* have almost lost their vitality and a seemingly similar marriage practices especially among urban Shinasha dwelling in urban centers have emerged due to the influence of modernization.*

*Key words: Tradition, Modernity, Shinasha, Marriage practices, and Benishangul-Gumuz*

## BACKGROUND: HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL

Marriage traditions and practices have been one of the cultural manifestations in Ethiopia which have been exposed to a process of continued relation that has emerged between tradition and modernity since the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "The discourse on modernity is discourse on change, accelerating change" (Wagner 1999:195). This lends idea to the argument that modernity is a process of replacing and even rejecting what has existed before as tradition before the coming of the supposed change. This

discourse from the vantage of change and its emergence due to the oft-conflictual relation between tradition and modernity has been observed in many areas of life: cultural practices such as marriage, lifestyle and values, social organization, styles in artistic expression, technology, etc. However, the thinking that sees tradition and modernity as contradictory and oppositional has been challenged by some suggesting that they can complement one another within a certain specific historical time indicating that 'modernity contains traditionality'. That is, for instance, in the study area, traditional and elements of modern marriage practices have been

lately fused together and this has given beef to the idea that modernity contains traditionality. This, however, does not mean that dichotomization of tradition and modernity has lost its appearance in the study area. In many cultural practices found among the Shinasha, one can still find such pronounced dichotomization between traditional and modern practices. This paper thus is very much guided by the concept that highlights the temporality of tradition as being different from modern and it is the result of 'comparison and distinction' from modern as understood and practiced in the West.

In Ethiopia, as it is the case across Africa, this relation between 'tradition' and 'modernity' has been observed in terms of the attempts especially those living in urban centers have made in leaning on the cultural markers of the outside world, intentionally or not. Historical readings unearth that the period of Emperor Menelik was credited with the effort of ushering the marriage between the age-long and centuries-tested traditions of the country with the cultural markers of the then Western World. Following on the heels of such 'modernization' attempts, as Bahru contends to call it, Ras Teferi Mekonnen's rise to power further strengthened the move toward the new development. This can be evidenced by taking a look into the side he took and the convictions he developed when a seething political division, which sometimes exploded unto the public, resulted in the creation of two camps: Progressive and Conservative.

The first three decades of the twentieth century scholars of the country, whom Bahru refers to as 'the pioneers of change', markedly played a role in this bubbling politically-oriented cleavage and they gave their helping hand to the camp of progressivists. A notable example and a case in point is the seminal work of Gebrehiwot Baykedagn, *Hizb ena ye-mengist astedader* (lit. *Peoples and Government administration*). In this book, Gebrehiwot was very critical of the existing political economy and tried to philosophize on the blighted economic and political conditions of his country. Simply put, he begged for the 'modernization' of his country along western lines reminding his readers how the age-old political economy had eroded the Ethiopian people a knack

toward a better societal change and transformation. It was to such, sometimes bizarre, ideas that Ras Taferi bought himself into. The motion for progress, with the objective of creating an Ethiopia that fits the image of Europeans, got momentum after 1930 when the Ras's ambition of becoming the Emperor of Ethiopia crystallized into a reality. The Italian brief interlude and the restoration of independence in 1941 both gave helping hands to cementing the oft-unfriendly relation between 'Ethiopian tradition' and 'western modernity'.

The many changes the Emperor introduced after 1941 were testaments of the mood the country had been in subscribing to the modernity circles. The introduction of 'modern' systems of education, health and other forms of socio-economic and political structures further brought the youth of the country in the post-1941 period closer to what can be taken as 'ideals' of modernism. Referring to what had unfolded in the 1960s and the role the opening up the HaileSELLASSIE I University played in 'modernizing' the best minds of the country, Andrias takes the Ethiopian Student Movement the mid-wifery Ethiopian modernism. Though the students were much immersed in socialist ideals and thoughts, Andreas claimed that their subscription into a foreign ideology in their quest to bring reformatory change in the country could be taken as a mark of getting closer to being 'modern'.

The scale of the impact of modernism, *Zemenawinet* as locally called, has not been well studied in Ethiopia. In the apparent lack of such a research toward modernism and its multi-faceted faces in the country, it has been difficult to look into the relation that has existed between tradition and modernity and the change that has accrued from this relation. A major work, however, has been published by a coterie of social scientists who range from political philosophers, historians, architects to art scholars. Entitled "*What is Zemenawinet?: Perspectives on Ethiopian Modernity*", this work grapples with a general attempt how *Zemenawinet* is viewed among the literati in the country. These literati try to show how modernism has brushed Ethiopian tradition/s and some cases how it has tried to be of radical in nature in its brushing.

This paper this is very much in line with the historical development Ethiopia has gone through since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of adopting modernity markers and how these markers have put their impact in different life aspects of the country's people. One of the areas which have been exposed to such modernization process have been the Beni-Shangul-Gumuz area which was brought in to the real of the Ethiopian central government in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The unfolding pages show one of the cultural practices in the Beni-Shangul-Gumuz area that has been torn open to outside influence by focusing on the marriage practices among the Shinasha people.

### **MARRIAGE PRACTICES AMONG THE SHINASHA: CURRENT PRACTICES AND BRIEF DESCRIPTIONS**

The Shinasha people mainly inhabit areas north of the Blue Nile, river in what is now Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State, North-West of Ethiopia. The shinasha people relate themselves to the gonga peoples which relate themselves to the Middle East. The word Gongga is familiar to the Boro-shinasha. Gongga is commonly used for many centuries by shinasha people from various localities of the shinasha relation with other Gongga people (Abebe, 2012).

Then this people crossed red sea led by Hamati and entered Egypt. In 3679 BC the shinasha entered Ethiopia via Blue Nile and settled to North and South of Blue Nile, Wollega, Gojjam and Gondar. (Taye, 1987). Then continued their move to Mettekel forced by the military expedition from Christian kingdom (Tsega, 2005). The native name for shinasha according to local narratives was "Boro" as now called Boro-Shinasha (Addisu, 2000). The Shinasha have been known by different names. Among this Shinasha, Boro, Dangabo and Sinicho can be mentioned. So, in Shinasha community of Dibate district there are five types of traditional marriage which are discussed below these are: Wida, *Ts'its*, *Biqqa (puriyya)*, *Giwa and 'Nataa*.'

### **WIRRA (BETROTHAL)**

This type of marriage has great acceptance among the community of the Shinasha people. *Wirra* was practiced first by the interest of the male family ask the interest of the female family. The young man's family ensures that the family of the bride and groom are not related by blood. To confirm this, they would previously search through at least seven generations of family lineage. At present, a five-generation search is sufficient. (Getachawu, 2007).

The message was sent either by letter or orally by the elder peoples. An intermediary is a critical individual as bonds the gap between the two families. Once the man's family has acknowledged a prospective bride, they send a mediator to the young woman's parents to announce their intentions. After hearing what the mediator has to say, the woman's parents will impose a few conditions for the young man's parents to meet. The mediator takes this message to the man's family. Arrangements for the date and place of the next meeting are also sent to the mediator, who relays the information to the groom's parents. (Sahilu, 2007).

The father of the daughter after getting the message first debate with his own family to give response to check traditional practice of *Miliky* (to see obstacle) and also dream for the final response. This was named by the community called *ware dyla* (ዌረ-ደላ) and *gumedla* (ጉምደላ). (Addisu, 2000).

To see some symptoms whether good or bad to accept the marriage for example in their house to check whether the fire was on or off from the night up to morning and also to check the *bikil* how it was in a good way grow or not. If the fire stays tonight up to morning and the seed in a good way germinates it was a good *Miliky* and they accept the marriage. But if the fire no long stays up to down morning and the seed was not germinating the *milky* was bad and not accept the marriage. If the family accept the marriage the family of the daughter give for the survival of ongoing life different materials and also give cow. After this the male young boy take the daughter to his house by pack animal like horse, mule. The family and

neighbors dance a dance by saying: (Informants: Bezabih, Gemechu and Abel).

ባዩ ባዩ ባይሮ	የኛ ልጅ	our son
ዴኔ ዋዋ ባይ ዴና	እንኳን ደህና መጣህ	welcome
ዴኔ ዋዋ ባይ ዴና	እንኳን ደህና መጣሽ	welcome
አሽ አሽ አሽ ጆልቆ	ሰዉ ሰዉ የሚወደዉ	man have to love each other
ኖ አሽኒ ጋ-ዩን ቦሮ ደዊ	አማቻችን ሁሉም ይወደዋል	our new relative all love him

The above meaning was that our *mushiras* welcome and say dancing a dance by moving round two times the house and stand in front of the gate. In the middle *mushirit* on the right the husband and on the left the main *mize* stands. Then the mother of the young boy comes takes *ጃሊ ጃይጉምባ* means bamboo stand material from her son and said *አዋሩ ነይ ዋሬ ዋሬ*. It means the daughter is coming and make dance and join both *torena zenge* and say *ሽሬ ዘብረረዊ*. It means *Shilala* which means *ቢሺያ*. It means male boy marriage got acceptance when this ceremony was accomplished. Then it was expected that the male transfers from the left to the right. (Addisu,2000).

Finally, the male and female have special area in the house was settled and seat there and it was called *ጃንጉራ ቁጣ*. Which means the female's some part of her hair was cut. This was due to on behalf of now she was married. Up to one week the two male and females stay in respected area without work simply by eating and drinking. After a week the female start to work in the house. After one month up to a year the male and females called by the female's family to return and enjoy and to know the family of the female. (Informants:Gelayinesh,Guremesa and Teshale )

**Ts'tsa**

This was marriage practiced by the agreement of the male and the female to take the initiative without concerning their family. At the beginning there was now how of agreement between the two families. But

the young female and the male initiated in participating in the marriage due to the following factors like dalliance of the marriage, the two male and females be active in love, both families lack of money for the cost of the marriage. This was done first the boy finds the friends of the young girl to ask and arrange the date of meeting. Then with secrete without the information of especially the female family. Then the boy took the girl and move to his relatives. The ceremony of marriage was not the same day on the boy side strong ceremony took place but on the female family small ceremony took place. (Tilahun,2014).

The female family may make small ceremony after a year or two year or sometimes may have no ceremony on the female family. In the Ts'tsa marriage system first the father of the boy family sent to the female families as soon as in the morning by the messengers. If this was not done the family of the females not happy and expect the male family undermine us and may led in to conflict. The messenger when reach in the female house first talk different issues and then enter to the main issue. He explains about the male's family strong side and they start conversation. (Informants: Mosisa,Tadele and Tejitu ).

The messenger

ጀመሽ እረፊ	በምንም ቅር አትሰኝም	not to become sad
ናኣናትኒበምደንፍ	እኔ የልጁን ቤተሰብ በደንብ አውቃለሁ	I know well the boy's families
ታየሬ በጉኔ ዳኞሽ ፈሊቱዋ	አንተንም ከእኔ በላይ ልታውቅ ትችላለህ	I expect you also know them

The female father:

ሃን ኤጉር ኔማ	ይህ የምን ባህል ነው?	What type of culture is this?
ጣልዋ ሽአ ሼንጎ	የጨለማ ጉዞ ደስ ይላል ወይ?	Movement to dark is that happy?
ሽአ አዋ ብቃን	ጉዞ በጸሀይ ነው ደስ የሚለው?	Movement is happy during the day time.

Then the messenger takeout the letter and gave for the female father. Then if the female family accept, they decide the date of meeting. Then the next meeting the messenger and some members come to the female family by taking 1000birr for compensation. Then conversation started like this

The father of the daughter said:

ሀኒ ጋጫ	ይህ ንቀት ነው	this is undermining
ኤቃሊ ሀናቆ ኢትቃል	ለምን እንዲህ ታደርጋለችሁ	why you do such things
ቃዜ ኢትሽ ታቃዙ	እምቢ ብያችሁ ነው	I am not agreeing

The father of the son responses as follows:

ሀን ኖዴ ዋካሌ	ይህ በኛ የተጀመረ አይደለም	this was not started by us
ንጃጎ ጌያ ትኒ	የአንተን ዝምድና ፈልገን ነው	we need your relativeness
ፍይፈ	አትቆጣ	not to angry

Then the mediator's after listening of both conversations to agree them they say as follows:

ሀን አይዴ ፋይት ሽሊ	የሚያስቆጣ አይደለም	this condition not make angry
ደስ ደን ቤካ	ይህ ከድሮ ጀምሮ ያለ ነገር ነው	this culture exists since our past history
ዋትስ ደተሬ	የሆነው ሆኗል	Things are already accomplished
ኤጉር ወተርስ	ምንም አይደለም	don't bother
ሄንፈንስ ሽንጋሊ	አንተ የሰራኃው ጥሩ አይደለም	the male what you did was not good

After great conversation agreement was setup between the two groups. Then the father of the son gave some amount of gift for the female family. After this took place the female went back to her family after great discussion with the

respected date with her husband and some friends. Finally, on the day the female families welcomed and they know their new relatives' husband of their daughter. (Assefa ,2014).

### **Purriyya/Biqqa**

This type of marriage was practiced by force. This was a process when young boy loves some one girl and participate in the process without the information even from his families. He accomplishes this task suddenly supporting by his friends by searching information when and where the female moves. He got this information from the female friend places like around the river, market, millet house on the journey. The process is that as soon as when he sees the female, he said *ጥረረ ከጣረ* (*prere kimary*) which means now I abduct you make dirty you. (Informants: Tejitu,Assegie and Shibashi ).

During this time, they become careful not seen by the female family. Unfortunately, if her families saw the case it led to great conflict. After this the young boy and his friends took the girl to the neighbor house of the boy. As soon as when the boy's family hears the news, they send messenger either orally or by letter. First the messenger's talks about the cows and environments then enter to the main issues and try to persuade the father of the girl. The next day the relatives of the boy went to the girl's family to discuss the issues but the father of the girl become angry and shout not talk to the groups. Then the groups returned back to their home. The next day for the second time the relatives of the boy went to the female family as soon as possible to persuade the father of the daughter. (Addisu ,2000).

This *Biqqa* marriage was difficult sometimes it led to great conflict among the two families. This type of marriage has no much acceptance by the community. The marriage was arranged by the boy by fearing may be another person took her and the aim is to make for himself. In this marriage the father of the boy pay reparation by cash or in kind. The father of the boy begs the daughter's family any man can make mistake please forgive us. Even persons who have blood feud reach an agreement to persuade. Finally, the boy family make small ceremony and took their son from the neighbor house. The *Biqqa* marriage was not hot

and accepted by both male and the female families due to they have no information and interest about the marriage. (Wodisha,2010).

### **Jiyya**

This type of marriage was taking place when already agreed boy's family and female family previously the marriage. This was taking place when the boy wants to marry the girl before the expected date of agreements between the two families. The process was taking place the boy, his friends and mediators took fresh leaf in the night with great with silent sound. Unfortunately, when the door was open in the morning the groups immediately enter to the interior of the house. As a chance if they got the daughter, they took her and inter to the interior of the house. (Informants: Shibashi Allo,Merda Woyessa and Mossisa Alemu ).

After this the families of the girl find relatives and come to agree they have no any chance. This was due to the families of the girl if we say no the marriage in the future in the life of the female, she has no chance and live bad life. In this sudden marriage the family of the female become very angry. This was undermining us and shows great dislike for the son's family. This type of marriage was not also accepted mostly by the group of the family. This was due to even though we agree at the beginning about the marriage it didn't respect our culture. Especially the females' family were not happy and participate in the marriage ceremony due to the care for their daughter may be if we ignore the marriage bad things exist in our daughters. (Moges, 2004).

### **Naata**

This type of marriage was practiced when the husband of a woman died. The question was raised for the woman forty days after the death of her husband the marriage was practiced by agreement. First the woman asked to marry and if she refused, she was not forced. But if the woman agrees the marriage the process was took place according to the culture of the community.

(Tilahun, 2014 pp.). Traditionally according to the tradition *tskar* was took place only the day of Monday and in the next Tuesday the question was raised for the woman. If possible, the great brother of the ex-husband or if not possible relative of the husband married the woman even though previously, they married. But today now a day this type of marriage was decreased depending on the development of culture in the community, I think.

### **MARRIAGE PRACTICES AMONG THE SHINASHA: MODERNITY AND CHANGING TRADITIONS**

It should be reminded that the above descriptions of the different types of marriage practices among the Shinasha people are presented based on synchronic or current data. This paper has attempted to collect data to analyze elements of change and continuity among the marriage practices of the study area. As it has been the case in many parts of the country, especially in rural areas, the age-long traditions have largely been put under the progressively increasing pressure of modernization. Marriage practices have not escaped from such increasing modernization pressure and its effect on their traditional continuity. What was supposed to be the family affair and domain for long at least until 1974 has now become an individual-based affair and is based spouse-agreement based. Previously, elders to ensure the acceptance of the girl's family would be sent without the prior knowledge of the spouses. Even in some areas of the country, arrangement for future marriage were made before the children were born or in their early childhood years between families. In the last three or so decades, informants have averred that such traditions have been eclipsed by modernity- influenced thinking that boys and girls should be at liberty to choose whom to marry. Unless the boy or the girl gives approval to such arrangement with her/his consent, mere arrangement between families would be a guarantee for the children to get married.

To show this change and continuity, informants have cited the dwindling vitality of *Naata*, a traditional marriage practice of making the widow marry the brother of the deceased husband. This practice has

come under increasing scrutiny especially from the side of the youth. Oral data indicates that pro-women schooling and pro-women government policies and practices implemented since the 1970s and 1980s have played crucial roles in making Natta lose its vitality. These days, especially among the rural Shinasha this marriage practice has become a taboo in particular among the youth. What a shift in cultural orientation! Through this exposure to modernization, informants argued, what used to be a dominant marriage practice has these days become a taboo. Informants have attributed this change to the increasing influence of modernity and its thinking in the area.

Coming to *Jiyya* and *Biqqa*, informants state that they have lost their importance in the recent decades. For instance, *Jiyya* has lost its importance because it only took into account the will of the families of the children and it at all was not concerned about the needs and interests of the children toward this marriage relation. Recently, the *Giwa* marriage practice have lost importance among the Shinasha because the youth have started to take matters related to marriage decision making in their own hands and have become more and more proactive in choosing who should be their marriage partner. In addition, the status of *Biqqa* as a marriage practice, a dominant among the Shinasha decades before, has been seriously threatened. *Biqqa* was a practice of forceful marriage by which a girl was forced to marry a boy. It was tantamount to marriage by abduction. This has been viciously attacked by government bodies and different national and local organizations as a harmful traditional practice. In particular, after 1991, with the introduction of pro-women policies and strategies women, *Biqqa* has lost its important place among the Shinasha and has become a rarity these days.

It is only the *Ts'tsa* and *Wida* with some new injections that have continued with increased vitality. Especially, *Ts'tsa* has transformed itself as it originally aligns itself with the will of boys and girls in consummating marriage practices.

## CONCLUSION

From the above expositions and explications, it can be understood that the traditional marriage practices among the Shinasha discussed above have gone under considerable change as a result of many factors among which the increasing influence of modernization is one. This paper thus has tried to see change continuity among the Shinasha marriage practices from the prism of Tradition and modernity. It thus surmises that the marriage practices and indeed many of them has been under profound transformation as a result of the irresistible force of modernization that has set in as a historical process in the areas especially after 1974.

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