

# The Vitality of Indigenous Religious Institutions Maintaining Social Cohesion Among the Gurage People of South Central Ethiopia

AKMEL MOHAMMED USMAN (PhD)  
GETU DEGU AIMIRO (Mr)  
Wolkite University, P.O.B. 07

## Abstract

This paper is designed to examine the origin, development and dynamics of the traditional religious and social cohesion institutions of *Bozhe*, *Og'yet*, *shana* and *bittar* among the Gurage of South Western Ethiopia through following historical and contemporary approaches. Following the propagation of Islam and Christianity into the Gurage land, these indigenous institutions have been changed drastically through the processes of syncretization and accommodation. Despite many of the Gurage people were converted either to Christianity or Islam through the historic processes of religious syncretism, they continued worshipping the *Bozhe* and *Og'yet* deities and make use of the indigenous institutions of *shana* and *bittar* to handle different dispute cases. At present, the Gurage people show their preference to the indigenous institutions of *bittar* and *shana* to handle ritually sanctioned cases that cannot be resolved by state institutions. Therefore, this study needs to examine the role of these indigenous religious and social cohesion institutions in maintaining peace and stability at individual and tribal levels among the Gurage.

## i) INTRODUCTION

The term Gurage is used as a common name for the major socio-linguistic groups to whom they long been inhabited the Gurage land who commonly share the same ancestral origin. Geographically, inhabitants of the Gurage land are clustered into two neighborhood territories: Eastern Gurage is a region inhabited by Sodo (Kistane) Gurage and speaks *Sodigna*, the Masqan Gurage speaks *Masqangna* and the Dobi who speaks *Dobigna*; and Western Gurage is the home of several sub-groups to whom are called jointly *Sabat Bet Gurage* (which is literary meant seven houses)—Ezha, Geta, Meq'werqwer, Muhre and Aklil, Endegane, Yegre-Anghet Cheha and Yinor (Gebreyesus 1991, Worku 1991). In addition to this, the Silte people were geographically categorized as Eastern Gurage people prior to their political separation from the Gurage ethnic groups in 2001 ((Kishan and Akmel 2006b).

From the list stated above, the focus of this undertaking is specifically bent on the Western Gurage wherein *Sabat Bet Gurage* is inhabited. However, today's *Sabat Bet Gurage* is the result of preceding interaction of all other Gurages. We are very much convinced that any form of historical account on this specific region (*Sabat Bet Gurage*) could be scanty or barely appreciate the current socio-cultural dynamics if not to be integrated and take in the remaining areas. Besides, it may help to comprehend on what basis (such like socio-political, economic and religious -worldviews) are shared denominators as well as differences build among the two groups. In this regard, various sets of actions, for instance, language similarity, artifacts, technology and mode of production as a people of "enset culture complex" of southern Ethiopia (Shack, 1966) offer instructive lessons on how communalities and differences of certain groups can be sought in an in-depth historical analysis.

The role of geography also seemed to have bigger on both integrating different groups of Gurage and led them to draw shared values. For instance, the propagation of Islam and its proselytization activities all through the Eastern Gurage and the *Sabat Bet Gurage* believed to have pulling them together and raise sense of cohesion of the two groups. This area is also historically rich since the down of 18<sup>th</sup> century in which the Eastern Gurage had been the hub of Islam and Christianity while the western Gurage was a province for traditional belief system. Even so, the majority of the Masqan and the Silte were long been adherents of Islam, the Sodo Kistane and the Dobi have been followers of Orthodox Christianity for centuries. Amidst of these, the *Sebat Bet* (Western Gurage) used to follow the traditional belief system as represented by "Waq" and gradually converted to Islam and Christianity during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dinberu Alemu, et al. 1995) (Makoto, 2005). This entails that the ongoing world view, including religion of the study population had been shaped, changed and continue to be shaped by age old interactions of different groups (for example through common customary institutions of conflict resolution, marriage, harmony and disagreement). A joint historical venture on the two regions of Gurage communities is just not imperative but also very sound to understand key societal transformations (Murdock, 1959) (Kishan and Akmel 2006a).

This research is conducted based on the empirical data that is obtained from fieldwork. To this end, fieldwork was conducted in the selected sites of Imdibir, Inemor Ina Ener, Wolkite, Woliso and Adiss Ababa. For that reason, we select these sites to make the study complete through analyzing the dynamic nature of the

indigenous religious social cohesion institutions at different societal levels. Altogether, the fieldwork has taken ten months between October, 2016 – July, 2017. Our research data is collected by using Guragigna (which is the local language of the Gurage people) in the research sites of Imdibir and Inemor Ina Ener and we have used Amharic in the sites of Wolkite, Woliso and Adiss Ababa wherein most Gurage individuals speak Amharic, which is the working language of the country. For the purpose of this study, an ethnographic approach, which is the major element of qualitative research style, is applied. The method that is applied in the course of accomplishing the research include informal interview, semi-structured interview, focus group discussion, participant observation, case studies and secondary sources.

For the purpose of this study the concept of syncretism is found fitted through conceiving it could press out the processes of the incorporation of indigenous social cohesion institutions to the frame of Islam and Christianity. The etymological definition of the term syncretism that is given by the free encyclopedia defines; it is the combining of different, often mutually exclusive beliefs that amalgamate practices of diverse religious and traditional customs.

## ii) The Syncretization of Indigenous Religious and Social Cohesion Institutions

The Gurage have been developed and make use of customary institutions that are effective in maintaining social cohesions from time immemorial. Some of these social institutions that have been shared and practiced by all Sabat Bet Gurage people irrespective to religious or group difference are like *Yejoka Qicha* (the customary law of the Sabat Bet Gurage), *wokashe siqrot* (divinatory ritual sanction institution), *shana* (traditional institution of ritual protection), *Gurda* (an institutional form of ritual bond-friendship) and *Wag* (An advisor/interpreter of the customary law). Despite the fact that there has been taking place mass conversion either to Islam or Christianity in the *Sabat Bet Gurage* since the nineteenth century, these social institutions have been continued to be practiced with some adjustments and through incorporating some elements from Christianity and/or Islam.

Before the advent of Christianity and Islam into the Gurage land, the different tribal groups of the Sabat Bet Gurage were worshippers of traditional religions (Trimingham, 1952). The three main ritual cults that had been worshipped by the Sabat Bet Gurage were *Waq'*, *Bozhe* and *Demwamit*. The ritual cults of *Bozhe* and *Demwamit* were worshipped by the whole Gurage, except the tribal groups of Muhi'r wherein Christianity has survived from long ago. Even though *Waq'* was worshipped by all Gurages, each tribal group of the Sabat Bet Gurage had their own *Waq'* with local names. These were the five cults of Chaha *Waq'- Og'et*, *Waq'* of G'eta- *Manduwe*, *Waq* of Yinor- *Jeber*, *Waq* of Ezha\_\_ *Eng'eber* and *Waq* of Muhre\_\_ *Eyesus*. Besides worshipping their local cult, more people from the Sabat Bet Gurage began worshipping mainly the Ye Chaha *Waq'- Og'et*, which they believed was more powerful and considered as god of war. As such, they believed that it could protect them from external attack.

Nevertheless, presently the Sabat Bet Gurage people has totally abandoned worshipping the *waq* cult that was represented to each tribal localities, except revering to the deity of *Og'et* (*ya chaha waq*) which is believed to be the main deity whose spiritual favors enhance the prestige and valour of tribes who honor him and respect his supernatural powers (Shack:1966).

The annual ritual observance for the cult of Ye Chaha *Waq'* is termed as *chisht* and was celebrated in the sacred shrine of *Og'et* in a specific place called *Wagabacha*, which in turn is located in Chaha. During the previous times *chisht* cult was the central force uniting Gurage men of all tribes. Gurage women were prohibited from taking part in *chisht*, by claiming supernatural authority. However, in nowadays women are no longer prohibited from attending *chisht*, since one can observe more women than men in the sacred shrine of *Og'et* taking part the ritual celebration. Another important development that currently substantiates the changing nature in the religious composition of the worshippers of *Og'et* is that the Muslim Gurages are not attending publicly the *chisht* festival associating its ritual practices with Orthodox Christianity.

The second ritual cult in the Sabat Bet Gurage is called as *Bozhe* (Thunder god) and its representative is known as *Yinangara Gweta*, addressed as *Gwetakiya* who is living in a sacred village of Inangara and his assistants are known as *Maga*. The *Gwetakiya* is belongs to the male member of the Entezera clan of Enor tribe. The *Gwetakuya* ritual position is hereditary, which is transferred from father to the elder son keeping its primogenitor lines. Like the cult of *Og'et*, there is an annual ceremonial celebration for the ritual spirit of *Bozhe*, which is known as *Nipwar*. During the previous times, it was celebrated annually in all parts of the Sabat Bet Gurage where the ritual agents of *Gwetakuya* exalted tribute. However, at present the annual celebration of *Nipwar* is confined to its sacred place of Inangara, where both Muslim and Christian worshippers of *Bozhe* are gathering to take part the ritual ceremony (Shack, W. and Habtemariyam, M. 1974).

The *Gwetakuya* assigns his representatives, who are known as *Maga* to the different tribes of the Sabat Bet Gurage in order to exalt tribute from the worshippers of *Bozhe* (thunder god). The gifts are offered in the forms of honey, wheat, bulls, umbrella, *enset*, and money. The worshippers of *Bozhe* in the Sabat Bet Gurage believe that the thunder god could mete out fatality and burn properties through lightning. For this reason the Gurage pay tribute to *Bozhe* to 'receive ritual protection against the destruction of their property by lightning, the principal

manifestation of the deity. He also provides ritual safeguards against theft, and the sacred paraphernalia, the *shana*, used for protection against fire and theft, is distributed by his ritual agents, the *Maga*' (Shack, 1966).

Therefore, this study defines that the syncretization of the traditional cults of Og'yet and Bozhe that resulted with the propagation of Islam and Christianity, and comparatively to analyze their contemporary dynamic feature that can be defined in terms of *shana* and *bittar* religious practices and maintaining social order among the Sabat Bet Gurage. Contemporarily, Christian and Muslim adherents of Og'yet and Bozhe deities mainly seek the ritual protection of the cults that is delivered through the ritual agents of the traditional social cohesion institutions that are working as agents of the traditional cults in executing the ritual sanctions. Henceforth, these traditional institutions that are currently practiced by the Gurage peoples has been easily accommodated with Islam and Christianity through sharing their traditional spiritual power or incorporating some of their religious elements with the scriptural religions. As a result, there has been established a complementary relationship between the traditional institutions, Islam and Christianity. But, those indigenous institutions which were not accommodated with Islam or Christianity because of the continued asymmetric nature were either replaced by institutions of the two world religions or by the state institutions.

### iii) The Dynamic Feature of Contemporary Indigenous Social Cohesion Institutions

The indigenous social cohesion institutions of *shana* and *bittar* are effective in giving social adjustments and maintaining solidarity at times of crises. However, it is erroneous to see these institutions as existing independently either from the scope and influence of other religious denominations or between themselves. Rather, there is observed a status of interdependency in handling issues. Therefore, under the jurisdiction of only one social or religious institution, a case cannot be handled without the intervention of other ritual or social institution. For instance, when a homicide case which is handled more often than not under Yejoka (Gurage customary law), other ritual institutions take the responsibility of implementing the decisions given by the Gurage *Qicha* (*Yejoka*) (Shack 1966). Moreover, the ritual functionaries of indigenous social cohesion institutions, who claim that they inherit supernatural power to inflict punishment on the wrongdoers, have a very close attachment with indigenous religious institutions.

#### 'Shana' and 'Bittar': traditional means of attaining 'ritual protections'

It is dealt before that the newly converted to Christianity or Islam continued practicing some rituals of the traditional belief system, especially ritualizing the thunder god, *Bozhe*. The empirical data obtained from the sacred shrine of *Bozhe* and the region under study, the Sabat Bet Gurage Muslims perform two forms of ritual practices that are associated with *Bozhe* cult. Attending in the annually celebrated *Nipwar* ceremony is the first form of ritual practice that is performed by Gurage Muslims seeing that its detail is presented above. The second form of ritual practice that most Gurage Muslims partake is mainly aimed at seeking ritual protections through performing some rites that symbolizes how *Bozhe* reward or punish the good and evil and believing that its observation or otherwise can bring them benefit or harm. This ritual activity is mostly related with the day-to-day socio-economic activities of the Gurage, in view of that it is performed at homestead or village levels wherein the *Maga*, the ritual agent of *Gwetakuya* in each tribal district, leads the ceremonials and for the service he render receives payments.

Some of the ritual services the *Magas* execute when a demand is come from their customers or an incident is happened, includes rituals such as installing *shina* on properties to protect it from thefts, ritually extinguishing fire that is caused by *Bozhe* when it strike a house with lightning, and the *Maga* concludes the ritual sanctions, i.e. locally termed as *bittar*, succeeding *Bozhe* struck a house or other properties like cow and sometimes including individuals with lightning that is believed to pacify the anger of *Bozhe* not to impose additional punishment.

The ritual of installing *shana* on properties such as *Khat* and eucalyptus plantations to protect it from thefts is among the traditional beliefs and ritual practices that are still closely adhered by most Gurages, particularly the Muslims who are the focus of this study. Whenever a person wants ritual safeguard for his property, he requests the *Maga*, the ritual agent of the *Gwetakuya*, install for him the ritual paraphernalia, the *shana*, in his farm land. In view of that, the *Maga* install the *shana* fixing it on the tip of a long wooden pole that can be easily identified for anyone who pass through the village believing that when they observe the *shana* the villagers or other passersby cognizant of the symbol the farm is ritually protected by *Bozhe*. As it is described by most informants, peoples refrain from stealing or taking properties on which *shana* is installed, fearing that *Bozhe* would retaliate them with the striking of lightning. In addition to payments for *shana* services, when the owner of the property sells products, such as *Khat* and eucalyptus tree, that are ritually protected from theft because of the installation of *shana* on it, he deduct some amount of money from the total sell income, that is considered as money of the *Maga*; locally termed as *dima'a*, and reserve it separately until the *Maga* would come and collect it. Otherwise, it is believed that a failure to reserve the share of the *Maga* would make *Bozhe* angry.

It is also widely believed by most Gurage Muslims that *Bozhe* strikes with lightning the house of the wrongdoer who steal property from the farmland where *shana* is installed or the one who fail to conclude the ritual process that is expected to be done after the house or property of the wrongdoer is destroyed by *Bozhe*.

According to the empirical data that is gathered from the study area, *Bozhe* strike the house of the wrongdoers without distinguishing different religious denominations, i.e. Christians or Muslims. When *Bozhe* strike a house with lightning, the owner of the house is not allowed to take any action either to extinguish the fire or removing properties from a house struck by lightning. Contrary to that, the owner of the house and his neighbors who aware of *Bozhe* strike down the house shrill a form of praise *yilil*, the Gurage term for ululations of joy, and *ashu afu*, i.e. literally it means '*Bozhe* we are pleased on what you did'. Regarding the tradition of positivism among the people of Sabat Bet Gurage, be it Christian or Muslim, on the castigation of *Bozhe* that strike a house with lightning, Shack and Habte-Mariam (1974:32) gives emphasis in his work of praise poems in honor of *Bozhe* and argues that only a foolhardy man would attempt, in his anger, to retaliate against the omnipotence of *Bozhe*. For that reason, repentance is the only recourse as it is discussed above praising the omnipotence of *Bozhe* through shrilling ululations.

The shrilling of *yirir* ululation in praising *Bozhe* is also used to alert the *Maga* that *Bozhe* has struck a house with lightning and the shrilling is kept up until the thunder god's agents arrive on the scene to ritually extinguish the 'flame of *Bozhe*', i.e. the fire of destruction caused when *Bozhe* strikes with lightning the house of the wrongdoer, and he take a mouthful of honey or milk and spit it onto the fire caused by *Bozhe*, thus symbolically extinguishing it and soothing the anger of the thunder god. Moreover, the *Maga* is permitted to remove property from the house struck by lightning. As a consequence, the *Maga* select white cow and brown horses that are removed from the house struck by lightning, for confiscation. The *Maga* hand over the confiscated property to *Gwetakuy*, the representative of *Bozhe*, subsequent to keeps hold of his partial share.

The process of concluding ritual sanctions, which is termed as *bittar* in the local language, is a related ritual service the *Maga* gives in the respective clan district where the office of his agency to *Gwetakuya* is authorized, after *Bozhe* struck a house with lightning. The main focus of this ritual is to recognize the punishment of *Bozhe* with pleasure through justifying the cause of the castigation as it is resulted from the wrongdoing against the thunder god, *Bozhe*. In view of that, the owner of the house struck by the thunder god needs ritual purifications, so as to appeal for the ritual intervention of the ritual agents of *Bozhe* to conclude the ritual sanctions that is imposed following the striking of a house or property with lightning. It is discussed above that all the properties removed from the house struck by lightning is confiscated by the *Maga*. Subsequent to the castigation of *Bozhe*, the land and other properties become ritually sanctioned, thus the owner of the house destroyed by *Bozhe* is not allowed to reconstruct a new one in its place unless he conclude the expected ritual process.

The ritual process of concluding the sanctions begins as soon as the owner of the house or property that is struck with a lightning request on behalf of *Bozhe* his close relatives who live in the countryside or in urban areas to contribute money that is paid to the ritual agents for the service they give for concluding the ritual sanctions. It is comprehensible that the Gurage people have a culture of mutual assistance, every close relative have a moral obligation to give financial and material support to a member of the family who encounter catastrophe such as *Bozhe* strike a house with lightning. The ensuing ritual stage is announced publicly the omnipotence of *Bozhe* and imploring peoples to give financial and material support for the sake of *Bozhe*. A small group of women that include the wife of the owner of the house and her colleagues begin to collect money on behalf of *Bozhe* by moving from village to village and market areas. Finally, the owner of the house that is struck by *Bozhe* gives the amount of money to the *Maga* for the ritual service he gives.

#### iv) Conclusion

To recap, from a brief cursory discussed above, the only point that does ring is the need to study on community practices anchored in the intent both to understand and make adapt to the current efforts of creating peace loving society. To the degree that the dynamics of customary institutions and its multitude dimensions are not understood in their entirety; it would be daunting task to concoct local wisdoms. Hence, it is found mandatory to examine the religious and social cohesion institutions of Og'yet, *Bozhe*, *shana* and *bittar* in line with the socio-political changes in the Gurage land spatially and temporally. With the study area indicated above, the research seeks to explore that: how underlying indigenous religious and social cohesion institutions have shaped and reshaped amicably with the new socio-cultural changes, how the process was maintained, why did the Gurage people prefer customary institutions to handle major ritually sanctioned dispute cases than other judicial institutions and on what basis were *shana* and *bittar* institutions to coexist side by side to the state institutions and other religions. And so, the study takes a look at the changes and continuities of these institutions empirically in an attempt to retort with these central queries and fill the existing knowledge gaps. Normatively, however the study unearths societal experiences which are proved historically so that it can be used to strategize the ongoing efforts of good governance by different stakeholders.

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