

THE ROLE OF ABELA IN THE GABRA SOCIETY:
A CASE STUDY OF GERONTOCRATIC SOCIETY OF THE PASTORALISTS

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ABSTRACT

The Gabra are pastoral nomads inhabiting an extreme dry land in Kenya-Ethiopia border. Abela is used for three kinds of meanings, a term of address to the elder, a kinship term referred to the father's sister's husband and a term referred to the mother's lover. There are several usages in several social contexts, reflecting some aspects of gerontocratic rules in the Gabra society. Especially, the roles of abela are analyzed in relation to the rules for marriage and sex, although the East African pastoral gerontocracy is generally discussed in the aspects of their political and religious institutions. In this report these roles are discussed with actual cases from fieldwork conducted in 1980.

INTRODUCTION

The Gabra are a Galla-speaking people, numbering some 40,000, who live in the northern frontier of Kenya. They speak a dialect of the Borana language. Also their physical and cultural characters are similar to those of Borana. Therefore, they were formerly mistaken for a group of the Borana tribe, or some authors called them the Camel Borana. Having their own territory or pastoral range, however, the Gabra form their own political and social units. The Gabra tribe is divided into five phratries: Galbo, Gara, Oldola, Sharbana and Algana, each of which has its own political and ceremonial functions. Further, each phratry consists of a dozen of clans.

Their country is extremely arid around Chalbi desert. They are pastoral nomads who keep cattle, camels, goats, and sheep. They have no cultivated field at all.

Imai and I conducted a preliminary survey of the Gabra during three months from July 1980, to investigate the ecological and social adaptation of the pastoralists to the extreme dry environment (Imai, 1982a,b). After short trips around the whole Gabra land, we stayed at two camps of Algana phratry for an intensive survey. The camps were situated at some 40 km west and 10 km south of North Horr, a small town near the border of Ethiopia (Fig.1).

In the investigation of their group composition and social behavior, I found out a term "abela", which is used in several ways, or in several social contexts.

Abela has three meanings. First it is a term of address to the elder man. Secondly it is a kinship term for the father's sister's husband. Thirdly it means the mother's lover.

I noticed the first usage in the field when I myself was called abela directly by some of the girls and the young wives in the camp. I found out its second usage through the collection of kinship terms, and the third while I investigated the personal relationships in the camp. This report

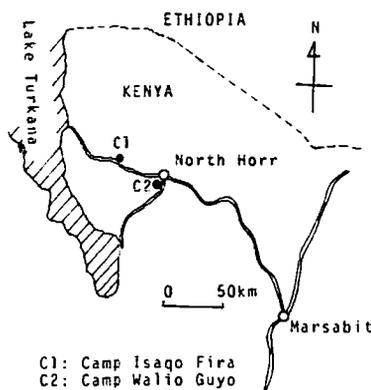


Fig. 1. Study sites.

aims to clarify the meanings of abela and to show some aspects of the gerontocracy in the Gabra society, which is the social background to it.

ABELA

1. The Elder Man

As Table 1 show, ahoho is a term referred to grandfathers and their brothers on both sides and its use extended to the clansmen of the same generation. Elders of other clans are called abela. Younger generations address the elder as abela in a respectful manner.*¹

People say, "Abela is like ahoho." Therefore, abela is respected like ahoho, a grandfather, and expected to be generous. He has to behave as a protector and to give things to young people. This relationship between abela and juniors is a joking one like grandfather-grandson relationship.

Girls would expect abela as their future husbands. Since elder-girl marriage is a general practice in the Gabra society, the abela generation is not so old to marry with girls.

From the Gabra girls viewpoint, abela is an elder man with generosity and property, and without kinship relationship. He would be a desirable candidate for spouse.

2. Father's Sister's Husband

Abela is the husband of adada, as Table 1 shows. His sons and daughters are dubri, patrilineal cross-cousins to ego, and it is the term referred to all the matrilineal cousins. On the other hand, patrilineal parallel cousins are classificatory siblings to each others, aboi and ada. This cousin terminology is considered to reflect the patrilineality of the Gabra society.

All kinds of cousin marriages are prohibited in this society. However, there is no sexual taboo between cousins (dubri), after the girl cousin has been married. Generally, sexual taboo between men and married women is very loose in this society, with clear contrast to the strict prohibition on girls before marriage.

Abela is a father of dubri for ego, but is not a clansman. However,

Table 1. Kinship terms of the Gabra.

<i>abobo</i>	FFF, FFM, MFF, MFM
<i>ahoho</i>	FF, FFB, MF, MFB
<i>ako</i>	FM, FMSi, FFSi, MM
<i>abo</i>	F, FB
<i>ayi</i>	M, FW, FBW
<i>adada</i>	FSi
<i>abuiya</i>	MB, MSiH
<i>arela</i>	MSi, MBW
<i>abela</i>	FSiH
<i>aboya</i>	B, FBSO (elder)
<i>aboi</i>	B, FBSO, Si, FBD (younger)
<i>ada</i>	Si, FBD (elder)
<i>dubri</i>	FSiSo, MBSO, MSiSo
<i>gurba</i>	So, BSo, SiSo
<i>intal</i>	D, BD, SiD

F, Father; M, Mother; B, Brother, Si, Sister; So, Son; D, Daughter; H, Husband; W, Wife.

abela calls all the individuals in the category of ego generation, as ijole (child) or gurba (son) and intal (daughter).

3. Mother's Lover

To the child born by the adultery of the mother his biological father is abela and the sociological (father mother's husband) is abo.

Abo is the sociological father who has all kinds of rights and duties to the child. On the other hand, abela has no right at all, but is obliged to perform some kinds of duties to help the child in his growing process. He must offer goats as gifts on occasions of the rituals in life cycle of the child, for example circumcision or marriage. However, he never receive any part of the bride price which his biological daughter brings to her sociological father.

Abela of this sort is not secret and not so rare in this society. I found out several concrete examples in Camp W. G. (Fig.1).

This camp consists of 37 members with the family relationships shown in Fig. 2. There are 9 households, 5 kin groups and 4 economic units (boma or klaal; cooperative unit of the husbandary of small stock).

In this camp, 5 individuals have their abela. Their relationships are shown in Table 2.

Abela G in Table 2 is an elder (about 50 years old) of the neighboring camp 500 meters from this camp. He often visited our camp. Abela F did not appear while I was there, and I was informed of his name only.

Table 2 and Fig. 2 point out the followings: All the children of No. 2 have their abela. Two couples (A--No. 9 and D--No. 3) live in the same camp. No. 9 has his abela and he himself is abela to A.

No. 2 is a Borana man, over sixty years old. He came from Ethiopia and married with a Gabra girl about 40 years ago. Her wife could not

Table 2. *Abela* and the children in camp Walio Guyo.

Individual in Fig. 2	Age	Sociological Father	Abela
A female	6 months	No. 1	No. 9
B female	28 years	No. 2	G
C female	10 years	No. 2	F
D male	15 years	No. 2	No. 3
No. 9 male	30 years	No. 2	G

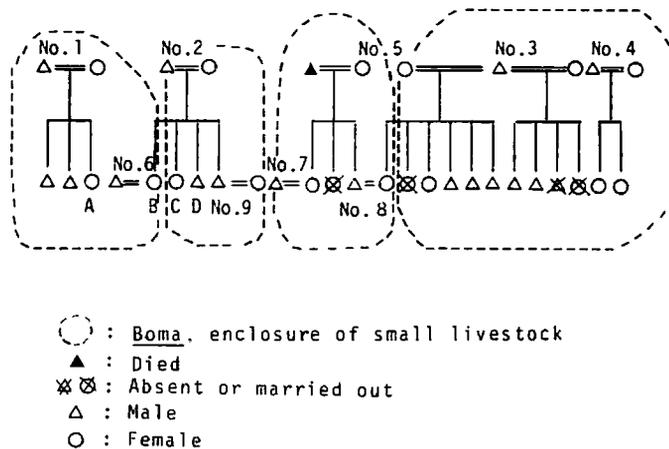


Fig. 2. Composition of Camp Walio Guyo.

bear his child for ten years after marriage. He got his children after his wife had kept company with her male friend. People say that he is satisfied with his family.

No. 1 has suffered from a disease of backbones these several years. He is often in the bed. His wife has made friend with No. 9, and a baby (A of Fig. 2) was born six months ago. The facts mentioned above are informed by the people in the camp as a general point of view. I will add further concrete examples informed by No. 3. He confessed that he is abela to a son of No. 2 (D in Fig. 2). He helps the boy to get some goats as the gift from abela, especially when the boy was circumcized. He will contribute small part of the bride price, when the boy wants to marry. Generally, bride price in the Gabra society is paid formally by three camels or cattle. Sociological father prepares most of these animals and abela would assist the other gifts such as tobacco, cloth or small livestock.

No. 3 says that he has other lovers in other places, he is abela to 10 children altogether. He has two wives and 10 children in wedlock, so he is a biological father of 20 children in total. The children by abela are not discriminated from others in this society. I was much impressed that No. 2 loved all his children heartly. Also, it is interesting for me that sociological fathers and abela keep a good friendship with each other for a long period.

DISCUSSION

So far I have stated several aspects of abela. Next, I will pick up some points of the social background or circumstance which are important with respect to the social meanings of abela. I will examine and discuss some rules for marriage and sex, because they would serve for understanding the function of abela in this society.

1. Age of Marriage

The age of the first marriage is, in general, about thirty for males and from fifteen for females. As the necessary condition for marriage, boys and girls must be circumcised (circumcision for boys and clitoricision for girls). The age of this operation is, in general, 15--18 for boys and 12--15 for girls. Girls are betrothed very young, sometimes before circumcision or even while only a mere baby. Through the long period of betrothal, her father receives many kinds of gifts from the father of the groom.

On the other hand, since the boys have not their own properties, they remain herdboys for a long period and engage in taking care of livestock of the family, up to thirty years old. If there are many sons in a family, younger one's marriage would be delayed more than his elder brothers.

Thus girls marry to a man fifteen years older than herself, even in her first marriage. The age difference would be even greater in the second marriage and so forth, by the system of polygyny. Therefore, girls sometimes marry with elders in the same generation as her grandfather, as abela. The elderman-girl marriage is common in the Gabra society. In the most extreme case, one of my informants declared that he is 98 years old and his wife is only twenty.

2. Sexual Taboo

(i) Girls before marriage

Verginity of the girl is most important in this society. Girls are strictly prohibited from sexual intercourse. If a man commits this crime, he must hold the formal marriage with the girl; he must pay the animals of bride price, or he is exiled from the society. All the relatives watch their girls carefully. However, there are sometimes in towns the girls called chapanti, who have committed the crime and have been exiled from their native places. A runaway match is the last method for the young couple who are in love with each other and are not permitted by their parents. They run away to the elder of the phratry whom they ask to arrange their marriage. In this case, the groom and his relatives must promise to pay bride wealth afterwards.

(ii) Women after marriage

Once women are married, the sexual prohibition becomes comparatively loose for them. In principle, there is no taboo between a man and a married women, except between the dyads mentioned later. A man could have sexual relation with even a cousin (dubri), though all sorts of cousin-marriages are prohibited. Moreover, there is no taboo, in principle, on the sexual relationship between a man and his brother's wives except the youngest brother's wives in Algana phratry. This rule varies among phratries. Torry (1973) stated that a man is prohibited from his eldest brother's wives in the phratries of Gara, Oldola, and Sharbana.

(iii) Married couple

Postmarital residence rule of the Gabra is uxorilocal (Torry, 1976). Man must live in the camp of his affines at least for one year. If he is an eldest son, his father and family sometimes come to live with him. Thus, the relationship between a man and his affines is very intimate, both socially and economically. Married couples have to avoid each other

from sexual intercourse for two years after the birth of their children. It lasts three years in some cases. Sometimes the husband's parents (patrilateral grandparents of the new born) obey this rule. During this period, the husband sleeps outdoors like a herdboys. They often go to live in another place or to get another job, for example transportation of livestock or digging up wells.

Some informants say that they keep the sexual avoidance from their wives during the midst of dry season for the reason of food storage. They express, "We sleep outdoors like as herdboys during the dry season."

3. Taboo with Respect to Affines

The Gabra man must keep the avoidance relationship with five kinds of affinal women. They never speak nor look each other. This taboo is executed most strictly. The five women are the representatives of the five categories of the affines; (1) wife's mother (ayi), (2) wife's mother's sister (arela), (3) wife's mother's brother's wife (arela, or niti abuiya), (4) wife's father's brother's wife (ayi), (5) wife's father's sister (adada). These five women are together called sodan ayi, which literally means "affinal mothers." However, one of women in each category, especially the eldest one, is selected for this taboo. This taboo has effects so powerful that even the women with the same personal name to sodan ayi are avoided similarly. This avoidance relationship lasts to the end of his life, even if his wife has died.

It is generally said that the other affinal women also might be rather avoided from sexual behavior. Especially, a man must avoid sexually his wife's sisters of the same mother. He can not select the second wife from these sisters in law. However, if the wife dies, her husband will expect to marry with one of his wife's sisters. If there is not a girl appropriate to marry in that family, any girl in the same clan would be appointed. Sororate marriage prevails in the Gabra society.

Examining some of the social rules of marriage and sex mentioned above, I will discuss the meanings of abela more precisely.

From the examples in Table 2, it has been already shown that abela is related to the women whose husbands are likely barren by some physical troubles. The wife would prefer to bear her husband the children by abela, rather than remain childless. The most important purpose for married couples in the Gabra society is to raise their children, as well as in all the traditional African societies.

Therefore abela sometimes becomes a existence necessary for childless couples. Also it has been already mentioned that the sexual prohibition of married female is relatively loose, and adultery is not rare in this society.

Adultery itself is a very bad behavior, and severe disputes would occur if it is manifest to the husband directly. In such a case, the adulteress runs away to her father or brother who received the bride price upon her. People say that they would never return camels to their affines. Therefore, the meeting of the conciliation will be held by the elders of the related clans in the locality. The Gabra say that the divorce would never occur in any case. This circumstance in the Gabra is similar to those of the Borana and the Rendille (S. Sato, personal communication). This may be general among the Galla-speaking tribes. In the Somali society, however, women are strongly prohibited from extramarital sexual behavior and the adulteress might be divorced or even killed.

The taboo between a man and five affinal women (sodan ayi) is the most strict prohibition in the Gabra society. Torry (1973) pointed out that this taboo reflects on the economical relationships between man and his affines. A man must live and work with his affines, and they will assist each other. Five women and their husbands are exactly the members who

formally receive the bride price and divide it. Just the same members have to pay the bride price when their sons will marry. They have to help together the son in law economically. Thus, any kind of the transfer of the livestock is performed through the agnate-affinal network. Since, each individual is situated at some point in this network and is connected with others, he would acquire some kind of economical and social stability. This would be considered as a kind of social adaptation to the restricted resources in the extremely arid environment. It is also pointed out generally in East African pastoral societies as to the relationship between human network and animal transfer.

From this view point, the taboo of sodan ayi in the Gabra society could be explained as follows: A man must keep sexual avoidance from the wives of the persons who are economically and socially most important to him, even in circumstances where the sexual prohibition is generally loose. It would be the same as that a man must avoid his sister in law sexually even though sororate marriage prevails in this society.

In contrast to these persons, abela is free from this network in each of the three roles, the respectable elder of extra clan, husband of adada, or mother's lover. Therefore abela is not demanded of any kind of avoidance relationship. The three roles of abela belong to the same category in the human network. The respectable man who is generous like a grandfather would be a preferred spouse for girls and would be a lover to women. He is, however, not a young man but an elder, because this society is based on the gerontocratic framework in the societies of East African pastoralists. The gerontocratic aspects are generally pointed out with respect to the political and ceremonial institutions of the society. I will examine them in the next report.

NOTE

*¹Torry (1973) stated that abera (his spelling) is a term of respect to anyone belonging to a senior generation and it is equivalent for "Sir" in English. His statement on abela is brief and restricted to this meaning.

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